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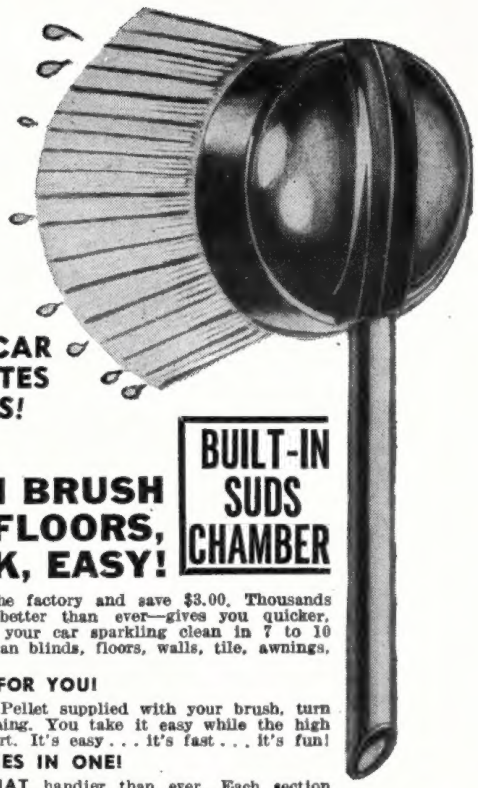

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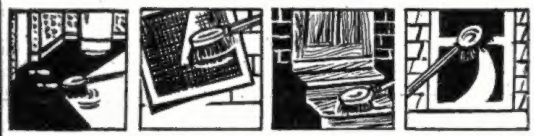

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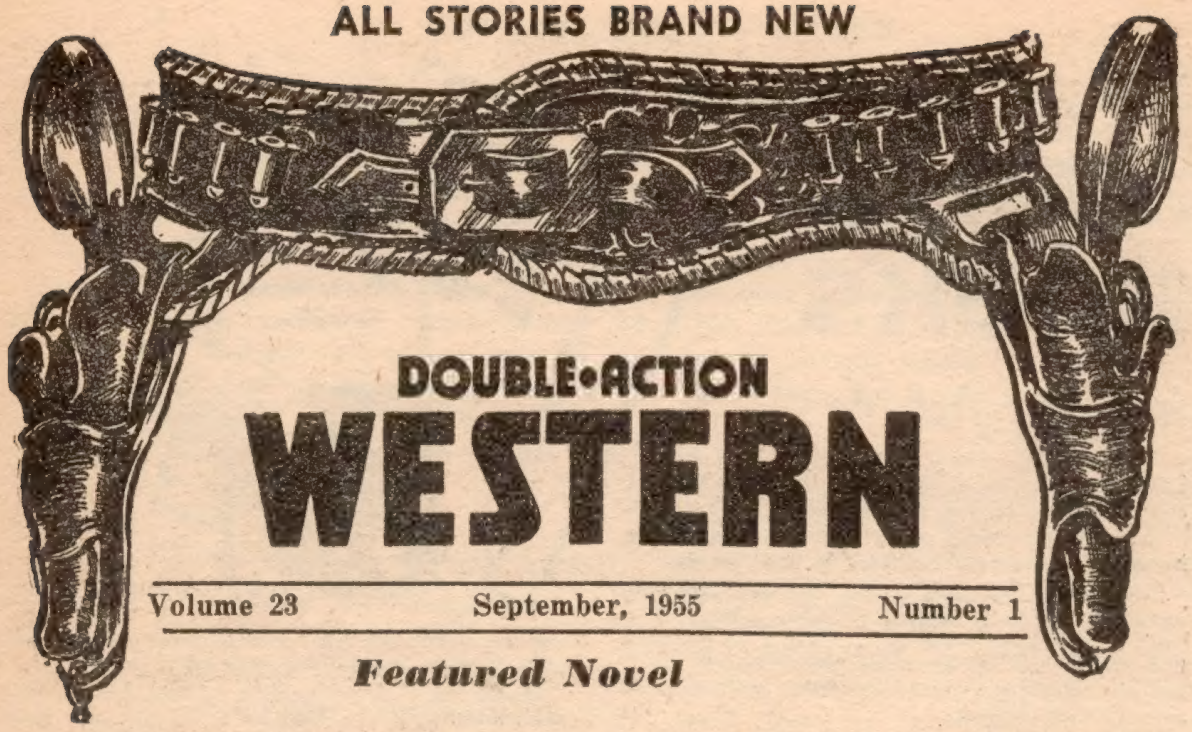

DOUBLE-ACTION WESTERN

Volume 23 September, 1955 Number 1

Featured Novel

THE TROUBLE-BUYER

by H. C. Early 6

For his boss at Wells-Fargo, Jack Ford had to uncover the gold that was stolen from the stage; but for himself, Jack meant to find the man who had murdered Bill Souter in the course of the crime. And the answer to both questions lay here in Visalia...

Smashing Novelet

VERMILLION KID ..... **Lauran Paine** **50**

Worse than drygulch bullets, or a frameup hang-noose, was the scorn of Toma Dodge—the girl the Vermillion Kid was determined to help.

Short Stories and Features

RANGE HOG ..... **Bill Henry** **66**

There was a lesson to be learned from Old Grunter...if a man was as smart as this veteran hog.

XIT (Special Feature) ..... **Harold Gluck** **76**

REPUTATION ..... **Ray G. Ellis** **77**

Too late, Ad Brophy began to realize why they egged him on in his feud against Big Bill Lars.

ROBERT W. LOWNDES, *Editor* MILTON LUROS, *Art Director*
MARIE ANTOINETTE PARK, *Asso. Ed.* CLIFF CAMPBELL, *Asso. Ed.*

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Featured Novel of Deadly Mystery

THE TROUBLE-BUYER

Jack Ford's job was to recover the gold stolen from Wells-Fargo; whether he got the bandits, or let some of them go—that didn't matter. But Jack was determined that one of them, at least, would find no mercy: the one who'd killed Bill Souter, after the guard was helpless!

by H. C. EARLY

THE WELLS-FARGO coach had nearly reached the top of the rise, and the horses were going very slowly when the ominous command came. "Stick 'em up and throw down the box!"

Ted Winslett, the coach-driver, was a man of tried and true courage. He knew that box held nearly forty thousand dollars' worth of gold, and he knew that his shotgun messenger, Bill Souter, was as courageous as himself. For those reasons he meant to fight. Before him, two men had ridden from the sides of the road—one from each side. They were masked, dressed in black coats, wide hats, black trousers pushed into riding boots, and each carried a sixgun in his right hand. The customary tree had not been felled and rolled across the road, so there was no other obstacle to the coach's progress than those two grim horsemen. There were no passengers to consider, as this was a special run made to carry the gold.

Ted pulled his long whip from its socket, flicked the lash over the ears of his leaders, and gave them a loose rein. "Hup Monty—hup Blue!" he yelled, and the coach lurched forward, straight at the riders.

Bill had his gun up by now, and at that moment his first shot rang out—to be followed almost immediately by a fusillade of shots—some from the horsemen in front—and some from the trees at the side.

Ted, poised in his seat, suddenly contracted his body and fell forward; he landed on the rump of the galloping horses and slipped down to the pole. Bill fell sidewise along the seat and lay there rocking, his gun still in his fist and blood pouring from two wounds.

The horsemen had drawn aside as the coach thundered towards them, but the horses were rapidly tiring, and one of the outlaws spurred alongside the leaders, reached down, and pulled them up. He was assisted a great deal by the slope of the road.

The stagecoach stopped. The body of Ted fell down and lay beneath the horses. The second horseman rode closer to the coach itself and looked at Bill. The shotgun messenger was still alive, his quiet eyes on the outlaw.

"Take a good look at me," the man said. "It will be the last thing you'll see."

He raised his gun and fired, then turned from the coach. "Come out and get this box!" he yelled.

Out from the trees which lined the road came four men—two on each side. They worked swiftly, while the two horsemen kept watch up and down the road. They had chosen the spot well, and did not expect interference; but there was always the chance of a stray traveller, and they did not mean to be caught napping.

Soon the heavy box of gold lay on the road, then a pack horse was brought from the trees and the box strapped to its back. The man who had shot the messenger took a last look round. "That's all," he said. "Let's go."

He led the way into the trees, towards the spot where the rest of the horses were tied.

Soon the birds, who had been startled into silence by the fusillade of shots, were emboldened by the quiet to sing again and flit from branch to branch in the hot California sunshine. It was very quiet by the coach. The horses had moved over to the grass at one side and were cropping peacefully. In the centre of the road lay the twisted body of Ted Winslett, who had died doing his duty. Along the driver's seat was Bill Souter, sleeping very, very soundly. So would the scene remain, in silence only broken by the chirpings of the birds and the tiny rustlings of little things in the grass; remain until the sun was almost down and a man came riding along and discovered the murder and robbery.

THAT DISCOVERY led to many things. It led to the rather prosaic happening of a man walking briskly through one of the ill-lit streets of San Francisco, which was a raw, wild and ugly town in 1855. Yet there was nothing prosaic about the young man. He had the reckless eyes of the born adventurer, a laughing mouth, and he carried a pistol strapped high on his side under his coat—an awkward place for a quick draw, but all right if you were trained for it. The man was about twenty-five and dressed quietly in a black suit with a grey shirt and tie, but he walked with a cat-like confidence, and occasionally there came a brittleness into his eyes which belied the laughter-lines of his mouth.

Before him rose a large building—large for its time, for it was four stories high. Along the top coping were painted the words *Express Building*. A large flag flew from a flagpole on the roof, and it screamed the words *Wells, Fargo & Co.* The building was on a corner, with three doors on one street flanked by ornamental windows, and two doors on the other street. Each of the upper windows had its little balcony, and scattered over the face of the building were signs such as *Sales Rooms, Real Estate, Atlantic and European Agents.* One door had the sign *Pollard & Co.* over it, another *Express Department,* and the place also carried the street names—California Street and Montgomery Street.

The man turned in at an unmarked door. Although the hour was late, the place was brilliantly lit with oil lamps, because the business of transport is not concerned with the usual times for sleeping and waking as dictated by the sun. The man climbed a flight of stairs, walked along a passage almost to the back of the building, and knocked upon a door. It was opened by a middle-aged man, who peered at the man. "Who is it?"

"Jack Ford, to see the Colonel."

The middle-aged man turned and called over his shoulder, "Colonel Pardee, Jack Ford is here to see you."

"I'm waiting for him," came a voice, and the man threw wide the door.

Ford went on through a room and into a further room, where Colonel William I. Pardee, manager of the Express Department of Wells, Fargo in San

Francisco, sat at a wide desk smoking a long cigar. He waved to a chair. "Evening, Ford; you came quickly."

"The top detective of Wells, Fargo and Company always moves quickly," Ford said with a grin, as he sat down and took one of the colonel's cigars.

"Humph!" grunted Pardee, who was in no mood for jokes. "Wal, you'll have to move quickly in this case."

"Another holdup?"

The colonel nodded. "Yes, and a big one—a nasty, troublous big one. The miners round Visalia have made a big strike and the gold was piling up. They decided they wanted it sent into town, and they hired a special express for the job. We guaranteed the safe arrival of the gold, and we put two good men on the stage—Ted Winslett as driver and Bill Souter as messenger. The gold was worth nearly forty thousand. Word was brought in not long ago that the coach was found near Fresno. The gold was gone and Winslett and Souter had been murdered."

The young man's eyes were brittle now. "Bill Souter was a close friend of mine."

"He had been shot three times," said the colonel. "Once from close up. Winslett had two bullets in him. Investigations made on the spot by the marshal of Fresno show the tracks of several men."

"Is there any gang operating in that district?"

"It has been quiet for years; that was why I thought two men on the stage would be enough. It seems to have been well planned."

"You think that it was planned by some gang in Visalia, who would be the only ones who knew the gold was going out?"

"I don't think there can be any doubt about that. No strange gang could have known about that shipment, nor would they have known the country so well. There is someone in that mining town who saw a big chance to clean up, and organize a gang for the purpose. He might already have a gang which he uses for other purposes. He saw here a chance too good to be missed. He took it—and he took forty thousand dollars, which must be replaced by this company—and that is a big blow. Visalia is a bit out of your territory, Ford, but you have proved yourself one of our smartest men, and I'm relying on you to get back that money—or most of it."

"And the gulity men?"

"Those, too, of course, but the company is mainly interested in the money. If you have to let a few men go free, let them go if it means getting the money."

"When do I start?"

"The coach pulls out in an hour and a half; get what you need and be on it."

"Riding would be quicker. If I could have one of the express horses, with a letter to get an exchange when I need it, I could be there in half the time of the coach. And I take it I will be travellin' under another name."

"Naturally. Which will you use?"

"Bart Wilson will do. A mysterious person, who might be an outlaw."

The colonel nodded as he made a note. "I'll have a horse outside for you in an hour. How much money will you want?"

"Better give me five hundred; I won't spend any more than I can help."

"Make sure you don't," said the colonel. "I'll want an account of every cent. Well, that will be here in an hour, too." He stood up and extended his hand. "Good luck, Ford. The company is relying on you."

They shook hands and Ford went out. As the detective went down the stairs, he was thinking sadly of his old friend, Bill Souter. They had been pards and had joined the Wells, Fargo Co. together. Somewhere in Visalia there may be the man who killed Bill—killed him, it would seem, in cold blood. The money might interest the colonel,

and it was a big factor, but what interested Jack Ford most, was the paying off of Bill's score. Somewhere in Visalia...

VISALIA. If you look on a modern map, you will find it marked. It was bypassed by the railway, and is almost part of Sequoia National Park, thirty or forty miles from the larger town of Fresno. Other towns have sprung up near it, but in 1855 they were not there. Visalia sat in the midst of a wilderness, through which men plunged and dug and scraped for gold. These men were too crazed with their search to worry about seeking food or shelter; so businessmen had set out to fulfill those needs. A town of a sort had been built in the midst of the diggings. It had one long street, upon which looked the garish fronts of frame buildings, buildings which often ran back quite a long way, and which mainly catered for other things than necessities— for the miners' craze for the pleasures of the gaming table, flesh, liquor or battle. Here and there tents broke the line of more substantial buildings. There was a crushing mill, agents, rooming and eating houses, a livery stable and smithy, as well as the saloons and dance halls.

The rush for gold attracted all classes and types of men. There were devil-may-care adventurers, ready to fight or work; there were men who had left the high stool of a clerk, and who looked ruefully at the raw blisters on their hands; there were honest men, thieves and killers. And amongst the businessmen were some whose greatest joy was to get their money dishonestly; there were men who charged outrageous prices—and there were a few honest traders.

The population was a shifting one, and at that time was larger than it is today. Into this town Jack Ford rode just on sundown one day.

As his horse picked its way along the dusty street, Ford looked at the crowds of people on the wooden sidewalks; the many wagons passing along the street; the horsemen galloping wildly, and wondered what chance he had of finding the killers of Souter and Winslett and recovering the gold. Yet he felt sure that the key to that robbery and murder lay in this town—and he had the job of finding it.

He drove in through the wide door of a livery stable and stabled his horse, had a wash at a trough, and bashed some of the dust from his clothes.

"Lookin' f'r gold," the liveryman said, glancing at Ford's saddlebags and bedroll, which contained none of the usual tools used for mining.

Ford smiled. "Wal, yes and no. I ain't gonna dig for it, if that's what you mean; you ain't sure o' findin' it when you dig for it."

The liveryman looked at him keenly. "I guess you're right, Stranger."

"They say gold is whar you find it," said Ford, "but I say let someone else do the findin' and then you know whar the gold is."

"You aimin' to set up in business here?"

"Mebbe," said Ford. "Whar's a good roomer?"

"Clancy's Roomin' House is purty fair, they reckon. Just acrost the street thar—next the *Blue Moon* saloon."

"Thanks," said Ford. "I'll see you again."

He carried his bags across the street, sidestepping an arguing Mexican and Chinese, and went through a door into a shadowy passage. Off to one side led a wide door marked *Eats* and on the other side was a narrower door marked *Office*. He went through the latter and found a counter. Behind it was a very fat man, reading an old newspaper spread out on the counter. He looked up.

"Oi'm Clancy," he said. "Phwat can I do for ye?"

- 2 -

WHEN JACK FORD had eaten a meal, he wandered out of Clancy's and stood on the sidewalk looking about him. Visalia was not warmed up yet, although the saloons were full of miners washing away the dust in their throats. Darkness had fallen, and the smoky oil lamps had been lit, throwing their gleams through windows and making yellow patterns in the dust of the road. The nearest saloon was the *Blue Moon,* which was next to the rooming house, and from this, there came the loud babble of voices always heard in a busy bar.

Ford slowly lit a cheroot, and wandered along the sidewalk to the batwing doors of the saloon. As he pushed them open, a sudden hush fell on the crowd—a most surprising hush, for it is no small matter to quieten a large bar of talking men. Ford was instantly on his guard, for he expected a fight was about to break out.

As he shouldered into the silent crush, they suddenly began to applaud, and he peered between the heads and saw that at one end of the place there was a small stage; mounting the steps to this was a girl with red hair, in a red dress.

It was a very red dress, and must have drawn the eye anywhere; but once that eye had been drawn, it left the dress to concentrate on the face of the girl who wore it. It was a lovely face, a glittering sort of face, with eyes and teeth that sparkled in a way which rivalled the jewels in her hair and at her throat. At a piano in a corner sat a man in shirt sleeves, nonchalantly chewing on a cheroot and reading a newspaper, which he now reluctantly placed on the top of the piano.

The clapping ceased, and the girl smiled over the crowd of heads. "What do you want me to sing?" she asked.

A hundred voices yelled a hundred songs, and she held up her hands for silence.

"One at a time," she said. "I'll take 'Swanee River' first. Join me on the second chorus. Right, Joe."

The last was to the pianist, who, still chewing his cheroot drowsily, struck the tinny piano and played the introduction.

The girl sang well. She had not the clearest of sopranos, but any technical faults were more than replaced by a great play of expression. She was heard in absolute silence until the second chorus, when the men joined her. Then there was a pandemonium of applause, whistles and stamps.

"Who is she?" Ford asked his neighbour.

"Ruby Parker," said the man, "usually called Red Ruby—not because of the colour of her hair, but because of the blood that has been spilt over her."

"She is beautiful enough to fight over," commented Ford.

"Don't try it, laddie," said the man, with a laugh. "She's dynamite, and she belongs to Lance Hart, the keeper of this place."

"Which is he?"

"The dark guy behind the bar, with the waxed moustache."

Ford shifted his gaze from the girl, who had begun to sing again, to the bar. He could not see Hart very distinctly through the forest of heads, but what he saw he did not like. Hart wore his hair fairly long and curly, the curls coming down his forehead and making that even narrower than nature had already made it. The hair was black, as was the moustache over his sneering, supercilious mouth. His small, black eyes were watching Ruby with an air of hard proprietorship.

At that moment a drunken miner decided he would like a closer look at Ruby Parker, so he scrambled on to

the stage. Immediately a man stepped from each wing to head him off; Ruby backed, still singing and quite undisturbed, the two men seized the miner and threw him unceremoniously back into the crowd. They were big men, and each wore two guns. They stood watching the miner regain his feet, their right hands hovering over their sixguns. The miner got up and pushed back into the crowd; the two men retired into the wings. Ruby, it would appear, was well protected.

The place was quiet now except for the girl's voice, so Ford could not continue his conversation. Several thoughts ran through his mind; that the girl must have a strong throat to be able to sing in such an atmosphere of smoke and liquor fumes, a thought which he dismissed as inconsequential; that this Lance Hart must run a gang—and that was far more important, for a man with a gang of gunslicks at his command could easily have a stage held up. Yet it was no evidence that just because a man employed gunslicks in his business, he used them for more unlawful purposes. Still, Hart would bear investigation.

Ford started to gently edge his way through the crowd. He was making towards the bar, and he reached it as the song ended and there was again tumultuous applause.

Ruby bowed and left the stage, and the din of voices broke out again. Ford edged his way along. He had conceived an idea; one which had worked very well for him in the past. If he was to find out who held up the stage and killed the driver and the messenger, someone in the know would have to talk. Outlaws did talk; he knew they loved to talk; conceit was their greatest enemy.

As a lawman, Ford had often found this the tool he used most often to trap the lawbreaker. For what is the use of being a smart guy if you can't boast about it? Certainly, the criminal does not shout about his crimes from the housetops, but he does talk to his own kind. For that reason, Ford had often taken the guise of an outlaw—to hear things he could follow up. It was a risky business, but it paid off.

FORD AT last found himself near the corner of the bar where Hart was leaning, smoking his cheroot and casting his cold eyes over the crowd, occasionally speaking to some acquaintance. He saw Ford coming and gave him a passing glance.

Ford stopped before him. "You the boss o' this place?" he asked.

Hart looked at him without expression, and slowly rolled the cheroot with his tongue. "I am," he said, at last. "What can I do for you?"

"Could I speak to you somewhere private?"

Hart's eyes became keen. "What about?"

"A job," said Ford.

"What kinda job?"

"Gunslick."

Hart did not speak. He looked Ford over from heel to head, noted the bulge under his arm, and at last brought his eyes back to the detective's face.

"I just seen those two guys throw that miner off the stage," said Ford. "That tells me you have to employ bouncers—and I want a job, if it pays well."

"Come in here." Hart led the way through a door at the back, along a short passage, and into a room.

It was a fairly large room, well furnished with a carpet, a desk, a safe, some cupboards and chairs. When the door closed the place was comparatively quiet, except for a distant murmur from the saloon. Hart waved to a chair, and Ford grinned and dropped in it. Hart went behind the desk and sat down. "You don't look the type. No gunslick carries his hogleg under his arm."

"I'm one that does," said Ford boastfully, as fitted his character. I'll

Red Ruby lay on the floor, a knife in her back. Ford knew she would never talk, now.

back m'self on the draw against any man."

Hart looked at him speculatively.

"Put me to a test," added Ford. "Give me a target and time my draw."

"I was thinkin' o' givin' you a target," said Hart slowly, "and you'd have to be fast on the draw to hit it."

"A movin' target ain't nothin'."

"It's plumb dangerous if it happens to be holdin' a forty-five."

Ford leaned forward. "You mean you—you mean you want me to bush—a man?"

Hart twirled the end of his waxed moustache thoughtfully. "Not in the back. Even this town won't stand for that; it leads to enquiries—and I don't want them. No, this must be done in the open—you must call this man down—and tombstone him. If you do, thar's a job here at ninety a month and free likker—so long as you don't drink too much and you does what you're told."

"That's fair enough," said Ford. "But this hombre you want me to send to Boothill—what's he done?"

Again Hart was silent for some moments, while Ford waited, sitting tensely.

"I might as well give you the spiel," said the saloon-keeper at last. "I'll be quite candid with you; I don't expect you to live very long. In fact, I don't mind tellin' you that you ain't the first I've put on to this job. If you pull it off, you're a better man than you look, and I'll be glad to have you. I'm not expectin' you to succeed, and this is why. On my staff I have one Mike Dutton. He is workin' for me, because he is the best gunslick in this town. The trouble is that he knows it, and he's got much too big for his boots. Because of the power of his gunhand, he thinks he owns the town—and me with it. I don't like that; I don't like him givin' *me* the orders. In fact, I don't like Mike—for a lotta reasons."

Ford made a mental remark that one of those reasons was Ruby. Mike quite likely had an eye on her, too. And probably he knew just a little too much about his boss' affairs.

"You see," went on Hart, "I'm bein' quite open with you. Mike is gettin' in my way—and I want him out of it."

"But that should be easy. You got plenty men—they could throw down on Mike sudden—"

Hart shook his head. "No; I tried that. Mike knows I hate him; he watches his step. I set two men to pick him at the one time—and he killed them both. The other men are shy of him. And the shot that gets him must be a killer; I don't want him able to talk afterwards—understand? I mean, there are things in every business—"

"I know—I know," said Ford with a grin. "I ain't no lily-white m'self. You shore set me a nice problem, for this Mike hombre sounds dynamite."

"Remove him and you get his job. You will know better than to act like him. If you don't care to take him on, then there is no vacancy."

"I get you," said Ford. "I gotta make that vacancy. Wal, I ain't afraid o' no man. Whar'll I find Mike?"

"He will be here shortly. Wal, I've told you the dangers. Don't blame me when you gotta forty-five in your ribs. And carryin' a gun under thar! You better carry it more handy."

Ford grinned. "Count three—and watch."

A dry smile hovered round Hart's lips, and he counted "One-two-three" very fast. On the last word Ford went into action, and before the word had died away, Hart was looking down the muzzle of a sixgun.

AT THAT moment the door opened, and Ford heard a gasp behind him. The gun vanished. Hart had gone slightly pale and he was blinking as he looked towards the door. Ford also turned in that direction. The girl, Ruby, stood there, her eyes wide with surprise. "I—I thought—" she began.

Hart laughed. "Come in, Ruby," he said. "This is my gal, Ruby—Mr.—?"

"Wilson—Bart Wilson," said Ford, climbing to his feet. "Howdy, Ma'am. I heard you sing."

The girl came into the room and nodded to him, still puzzled. "But you had a gun—"

Hart chuckled. "You thought he was throwin' down on me, honey. Nope, he was just showin' me how fast he can draw. And I'll say it was fast." He looked at Ford meaningly. "In fact, I never seen a faster."

"I'm glad to hear it," said Ford, "Not one?"

"Not one. Looks like you might get that job."

Ruby had gone round the desk to Hart's side, and was staring at Ford. "What job?"

"Just a job, honey. Mr. Wilson might be workin' for me soon; and again—he might not. It depends. What do you want?"

"I just came in to be out of the way."

Hart's eyes went to pinpoints beneath his narrowed eyelids. "Someone causin' trouble?"

The girl was still gazing at Ford, who was standing with his hat in his hand, looking at the carpet. "No—no, not at all. What is this job?"

"Just business, honey; forget it. Want a drink, Wilson?"

"After work," said Ford. "When do I start?"

"Go into the bar. Anyone will tell you whar the work is when it comes in. Then I leave it to you. Sabe?"

"I sabe. See you later."

"I hope," said Hart, as Ford went through the door.

As the detective went up the passage, he was thinking quickly. It would appear that his only method of getting close to the lawless element in this town was to kill a man. That was not strictly part of his job. One thing though; he had not been asked to murder a man, but to kill a man in fair fight. Yet, to a gunman of Ford's prowess, to call a man out was almost murder. The description he had had of Mike's speed made it much less like murder, and gave it an element of risk which made Ford's nerves tingle. The point to be mainly considered was whether he was justified in killing a man to reach his quarry. He could hardly avoid it now and, as he thought of Bill Souter, he firmed his chin. After all, he was not a police officer, but a private detective employed by Wells, Fargo—and what did one boastful gunslick less matter? Quite likely he would be doing the world a service by removing Mike.

He passed through the door and entered the noise of the saloon. The crowd had increased in his absence. He wondered if Mike was amongst them. He shouldered into a position beside the bar. "Mike Dutton arrived yet?" he asked.

"I ain't seen him," said the miner he addressed, and went back to his own conversation.

Ford leaned his back against the bar and let his eyes rove over the room.

Just then the doors swung open and Mike came in.

- 3 -

JACK FORD knew it was Mike, instinctively, although Dutton did not look like a gunman at first glance. He was a small man, but Ford knew a gunman when he saw one; and Mike had all the signs. He carried two pearl-handled sixguns in a double belt slung fairly low, and his holsters were fixed to his thighs by whang cords. Those holsters gleamed in the lamplight, because of the tallow fat which had been rubbed into the leather to make it soft and smooth; the butts of the guns swung just far enough out for convenience—and Mike wore no coat to impede his hands.

The gunslick was not old; thirty, maybe. He was fair, and he wore his hair short and brushed back. His chin and top lip were clean-shaven, but he had long sideburns. He had the thin, hard mouth of the killer, a broken nose, and close-set eyes. Along the left temple ran an old bullet-scar; that one had been close. Yes, Mike was a gunslick, or Ford had never seen one.

Mike swaggered across the room, waving to men and women he knew, bawling some ribald pleasantry at others with an air of condescension. Ford moved a little away from the bar towards the gunman.

Someone brushed by him, and he saw it was the girl, Ruby. All eyes were on her as she made straight for Mike. Mike grinned at her, but her face was worried. She went to him, said a couple of hurried words, and went on across the room.

Mike's whole attitude changed, suddenly. He did not look after the girl, but his body tensed, and his eyes darted about him. Ford wondered if Dutton had received a warning from the girl. If so, things were becoming complicated. Well, there was one way to find out. He would go on with things. But not now—not at this moment; not while Mike was waiting for it.

He changed his course and made to one side, going through the tables until he reached the blackjack setup. He made a couple of bets and then turned away to make room for another player. He cast his eyes over the room. Ruby was out of sight, but Mike was drinking at the bar.

The man who had been grinding out tunes at the piano suddenly struck a loud chord, which managed to survive above the din. The drinkers and gamblers evidently knew what it meant, for they fell silent. Ruby walked on to the stage, and at once a roar of approval rang out. She did not seem so gay as before; her gaiety was more forced. Ford wondered some more.

He saw Mike pushing his way unceremoniously to the front of the crowd, and he saw Hart standing in his accustomed place at the corner of the bar. Hart's eyes were roaming the room; they came to rest on Ford. Ford slanted his head slightly in the direction where Mike had come to a pause in the front of the crowd. Hart nodded. Ford was sure now, although he had heard Mike called by his name several times.

Ruby looked down at Mike, smiled, and commenced to sing. Ford began to slowly edge his way towards the gunslick. Ruby's eyes were roving over the crowd, and they fell on Ford, who was watching her as he moved. At once fear leapt into her eyes, and they darted to Mike. Mike understood. He turned away and looked in the direction her eyes had again taken—and he saw Ford coming through the unmoving throng towards him. His right hand dropped a little, and he kept his eyes on Ford. Now the detective knew why and let his eyes rove over the room.

Just then the doors swung open and Hart's plans went astray.

Ford was still looking at the stage, but he was watching Mike from one corner of his eye. He understood a lot of things now. The fact that Hart had not mentioned Mike's name before the girl, her suspicion about the "job"; her warnings to Mike. Yes, Hart's main reason for hating Mike was that the gunman was stealing the girl from him.

Ford came through to the front of the crowd, about eight men from Mike, who was still watching him, although Ford was ostensibly watching the girl, who kept her eyes from him. Yet her breathing was faulty, and it was spoiling her singing. Ford smiled at her as her eyes swept by him, but she took no notice, and her eyes went to Mike, pleading.

THE SONG ended, and the crowd broke out in applause. Mike moved along a little. He was only six feet from Ford now. He came even closer. The girl was bowing, her frightened eyes on the two men.

Above the noise Mike's voice came to Ford clearly, "You lookin' for me, Stranger?"

Ford turned squarely and looked at him. "Should I be?" he asked. "Who are you?"

"I'm Mike Dutton, the best goldarned guntoter in the world."

Ford smiled and shook his head. It's a small world you must live in."

Mike's eyes flicked over Ford, and noted the gun in the armpit holster. One could see him thinking: *This is going to be too easy!* His eyes came back to Ford's eyes and he said aloud: "What does thet mean, Stranger?"

Ford shifted his position a little, and now the two men faced each other. The girl had stopped bowing and was staring openly at the men. The applause

had died off, and all eyes had followed hers. Suddenly, the nearest men edged back as they realized that lead was likely to fly. The crowd behind pressed forward to see what was causing the excitement. The crowd in front pushed back. All this time, the men eyed each other; their hands hanging loosely, their bodies balanced on the balls of their feet.

"What did you think it meant?" asked Ford, and his voice came loud on the deathly silence which had fallen.

"I'm thinkin' it means trouble," said Mike quietly.

"That's my business; buyin' trouble."

"You come to the right man to buy it, Stranger."

Ford laughed softly. "I think not. What trouble could a sawn-off runt like you hand out? You shoot off your mouth too loud to be—"

Then the girl screamed—her scream echoing in the silence as the two men went into action. Mike went for both guns at once, and they were out as Ford's hand slicked upwards. Yet all gunmen have to aim, and as Ford went for his draw, he sprang sidewise and two feet upwards to the edge of the stage, knocking over candles which served as footlights. Mike had to turn and bring up his guns. As Ford's gun came out it was near his chin, and it was in line with his eyes a fraction of a second before Mike's guns got into that position.

Shots roared on that deadly silence —one, two, three. A cloud of blue smoke arose and a pungent smell filled the air. The crowd saw Ford standing on the stage, a red line on his cheek— and they heard Mike fall—two bullets in his skull!

Ford continued to move. He backed swiftly upstage until his back touched the ornamental wall; he stood there with gun ready, his eyes roving over the crowd, and especially the man in each wing.

Ruby screamed again as Mike fell. Then, in a flying rush of skirts, she leapt from the stage and threw herself on the body of Mike, weeping hysterically.

The girl's grief caused a low growl to come from the crowd—an ominous growl which made Ford watch the packed mass carefully.

"Take it easy, gents!" yelled a voice, and Ford saw Hart pushing through the mob.

Ruby heard that voice, too, and she stiffened and got some of her senses back. Now she wanted to get away. She turned swiftly and leapt up the three steps at one side of the stage, turning towards the wings, tears racing down her face. She saw a gunman standing there, his eyes on Ford.

"Kill him!" she screamed at the man. "Why don't you blast the life out of him? He killed Mike—he killed Mike!"

The gunman looked as though he would like to do her bidding, but he was not sure who would do the blasting. The girl swept past him and made for her dressing-room.

Hart had reached the side of the dead man. He glanced into the wings. "Loosen up, Joe and Pat—he's all right."

The two men understood; in fact, they had already suspected the truth. They had been asked to attempt the life of Mike, but had refused the job. This stranger had taken the job—and carried it out. Most of the miners and others in the saloon understood now, for they had been wondering how long Hart was going to stand being pushed around by Mike. They saw now that this stranger had deliberately taken on Mike, knowing Mike's reputation, and their attitude changed. It was a case of "The king is dead—long live the king!"

A cheer went up. Ford's gun vanished from sight as swiftly as it had appeared.

"Joe and Pat," said Hart, "come and shift this!"

He spurned the corpse with his foot. The two men left the wings and went down to cart away the body. The miners, gamblers and others returned to their amusements, talking excitedly about the gunfight. Ford ran an exploratory finger along the cut on his cheek. It was not deep and might not even scar, but it had been too close for comfort. He dabbed at it with a handkerchief.

"Wilson," Hart said quietly, as he stood up a couple of the candles Ford had knocked down, "come into my office."

He turned and elbowed his way through the crowd and Ford followed slowly, receiving backslaps and congratulations from those he passed: "Nice shootin', Stranger!" "Never seed a faster draw!" "Yuh musta bin spawned with a gun in yore fist!"

HE WENT through the door, down the passage, and into Hart's office. Hart was sitting behind his desk, lighting a cheroot. He pushed the box across to Ford. Ford took one and lit it, and Hart's eyes opened wide as he noticed that the stranger's hands did not shake one fraction.

"That was good work, Wilson," he said, "but before I engage you, we gotta understand each other."

Ford nodded and sat down. "As to what?"

Hart did not speak at once. He looked at Ford keenly for a moment, noticing the other man's good looks. "It's about the gal," he said at last.

Ford dabbed some more blood from his cheek and grinned. "I shore made an enemy thar! And they say the female is deadlier than the male. How does that make me stand with you?"

"I don't mind you bein' her *enemy!* So long as it stays at that. But Ruby's changeable. She always aims at what she thinks is the top man."

"Don't give it a thought," said Ford. "Women is plain pizen to me. I'd prefer a hoss or a dog."

Hart searched his eyes, and seemed satisfied at last. He relaxed and leaned back. "Wal, now we know," he said, and chuckled. "That Dutton hombre shore met his match at last. Whar you stayin'?"

"Clancy's."

"Move in here; you'll be my personal bodyguard, and I'll give you a room next to mine upstairs. You'll sleep there with one ear open, but you'll never talk about what you hear—and you won't barge in unless you know I'm threatened."

"By whom?"

"Every big man has enemies!"

"Shore!" agreed Ford. "But it makes it a lot easier knowin' who they are."

"I guess it does. Wal, thar's a hombre named Watson—Hiram Watson. He runs the *Flyin' Horse*, up the road a ways. Hi and me is business rivals, see, and I wouldn't care if somethin' happened to him sudden if he come lookin' for trouble. Then thar's the sheriff—Tex Holden; he causes me trouble at times, and I think he's in Hi's pocket. Then thar's George Paxton—he's the Wells, Fargo agent here. A little while ago someone held up the stage some miles from here, and Paxton seems to think I had somethin' to do with it. I didn't, see, but he's as stoopid as a mule. He also makes fish eyes at Ruby. I don't like him. Another one to watch is Wal Kilgour—he keeps a store, but he's old and don't matter much."

"What's wrong with him?"

"Oh, somethin' about his daughter. She run away from home, and I don't blame her. He thinks I had somethin' to do with it."

"I see," said Ford. "Any more?"

"No, I guess that is all that matters. Wal, you're on the payroll. Need any money?"

"Not right away. I'll hop into the roomer and shift my dunnage."

"You do that," said Hart, rising. "I'll go talk to Ruby."

"'Tain't none o' my business," said Ford, "but do you think that's wise?"

Hart paused on his way to the door and turned. "What do you mean?"

"I was thinkin' it would be a good idea to let her git over it. After awhile she's gonna realize that Mike is well and truly dead and she'll git thinkin'—and next thing she'll be lookin' for you. And I guess that's the best way for it to be."

A slow smile spread over Hart's face. "You're a good man, Wilson; I reckon you got the rights of it thar. Come into the bar and we'll have a drink out of my private bottle."

They went back into the bar. The place was packed tight now, the news of the shooting having brought more patrons. Even so, Hart seemed to always do good business. There were several saloons in the town, but the *Blue Moon* seemed to have the bulk of the trade. Ford wondered how much of that trade was due to Ruby. He also wondered how much she knew about Hart's secrets.

The two men pulled up at a corner of the bar, and Hart called for his bottle. The drinks were being poured when a man pushed through the crowd and tapped Ford on the shoulder. Ford turned and found a short, hard-faced man standing there, and he immediately noticed the badge pinned to the man's waistcoat.

"Yuh the guy who shot Mike Dutton?" the man asked.

"That's me," said Ford. "Bart Wilson's the name."

"I'm Sheriff Tex Holden. Yuh a stranger in this town?"

"Only rode in this evenin'."

"Yo're doin' mighty fine for yoreself yore first evenin'," said the sheriff dryly.

"Wait a moment, Holden; Mike drew first—"

"I ain't worritin' about the gunfight," said the sheriff, his narrowed eyes on Hart. "I got nothin' to say to anyone who blasts out another man in fair fight—especially if thet man happens to be one o' yore gunslicks, Hart. He can bush the whole hatchin' of 'em for all I cares, so long as he does it fair. But the law has some rights in this here town—and I'm the law. Look, Stranger, when yuh has a gunfight, yuh come teil me about it fust thing—if yo're able. See?"

Ford grinned and nodded.

"And don't git scatterin' slugs too free-and-easy-like, or you'll end up in the calaboose or a wooden box. See?"

Ford nodded again.

"Remember I got my eye on yuh and I don't like strange gunslicks," said the sheriff. then looked at Hart. "And I don't like yore comp'ny, neither. That's all."

He turned and pushed his way into the crowd. Ford grinned at Hart. "You were right. The sheriff don't like you."

Hart shrugged. "I told you."

"Wal, I'm glad to have met him," said Ford. "Now, if it's all right with you, I'll go take a walk and have a look at Watson, Paxton and Kilgour. I got a good memory for faces, but I gotta see 'em first."

"Good idea. You'll find Watson in the *Flyin' Horse,* Paxton in the office o' the stage company, and Kilgour in his store."

"I'll pick up my dunnage from the roomer on my way back," said Ford, finishing his drink. "See you later."

He pushed his way through the crowd and the doors into the street. He paused there to glance up at the stars. This seemed to be quite a complicated business he was in. He could understand the enmity of Watson, which was a business one; he could understand the suspicions of Paxton, but he didn't like the angle of Kilgour, the storekeeper whose daughter had run away from home.

He strolled along the sidewalk, and his questing eyes fell upon a suspended sign of a horse with wings. He turned in at the door of the *Flying Horse.*

- 4 -

THIS PLACE was not quiet, but it was far less crowded than the *Blue Moon*. It was smaller, too, and as he walked across the sanded floor towards the bar, a voice cried out: "Look out, Hi; here comes Hart's new gunslick!"

The words were said in a bantering tone, but they served as a warning, nevertheless. Ford did not pause, but his eyes flicked swiftly about the room. A man rose from a poker game, alert for trouble (Ford tabbed him hired gunman), another man swung round from the bar, and Ford placed him in the same category. The bartender reached under the bar, and a man spinning the roulette wheel stiffened and stood ready.

Another man stood up at a table near the bar. He was a tall man, about forty in age, a little bald in the front, and he affected a short whisker. He wore a long coat, and no gun was in sight. Ford continued on to the bar.

"What do you want, Stranger?" asked the tall man.

"A drink," said Ford easily. "You sell likker here, don't you?"

"Not to Lance Hart's gang."

Ford leaned on the bar, his eyes on the large mirror behind it that showed up the whole room, and one eye on the bartender. He threw a coin on the table. "I didn't come here for trouble; I dropped in for a drink. You Hiram Watson?"

"What if I am?"

"I just wanted to know, that's all. Call off your guards."

"Why should I? This is my saloon and I'm partikler who drinks in it. If you're lookin' for trouble, we can give it to you, but you'll get no likker."

Ford grinned slowly. "You got quite a bunch of trouble here, Watson. Does it take five or six men to refuse a stranger likker? Wal, I guess I can get it somewheres else."

He picked up the dollar and strolled towards the door. He had to pass the man who had been playing poker.

"Yella, eh?" said the man.

Ford continued on to the door. There he turned. "Am I? *I* know I ain't, because if I was yella, I'd never have walked in here. And because I know I ain't, I know that you're a liar!"

He dropped on one knee and three bullets passed over his head. He backed through the doors as he fired twice. The doors leapt with the impact of bullets. Then Ford was out of sight. He had moved so swiftly that it had all happened in the wink of an eyelid. The man who had called him yellow fell across the poker table, a bullet in his brain and another in his lungs. Watson's other gunmen were poised with smoking guns—still not sure what had happened.

Ford did not waste time outside the saloon. He leapt across the road between a wagon and a horseman—and found himself right in front of the Wells, Fargo office. He went inside.

Two people were behind the counter—a girl and a man. The man was tall and well set up, dressed quietly in black, about twenty-eight, and he affected a small, black moustache. He wore no guns. The girl was about eighteen, fair and pretty. She was working over a ledger, for those were the days long before a forty-hour week. The man was just reaching for his hat, preparatory to leaving.

They both looked at Ford as he entered. Ford paused, grinned, and raised his hat. "Howdy!"

"Good evening," said the man. "What can I do for you? Do you want to book a seat on the stage? I'm sorry, but tomorrow's is all—"

Ford had at last found a pretense for his call. He fixed his eyes on the girl

and continued to grin. "I want no seat on the stage; I'm stayin' right in town —and I got a reason!"

The girl blushed and looked beseechingly at the man. The man glared at Ford. "What do you mean?"

Ford shrugged his shoulders and leaned against the counter. "It's simple. I only arrived in town today, and one of the first things I sees is about the purtiest gal I've ever set eyes on. And I've been all this time findin' out that she works here."

"What!" gasped the man. "I—oh, I see—you're drunk."

"Not the slightest. Should I be? That can be arranged."

"Get out of this office," said the man.

Ford looked at him. "What might your name be?"

"George Paxton, and this is my office."

"Howdy, George," said Ford. "My name's Bart Wilson. And what might *her* name be?"

"That's none of your business; now get out before I throw you out."

"Aw, George!" said Ford reproachfully. "I ain't doin' anythin'."

"I'm making sure of that," said Paxton. "Come on, out you go."

He moved towards Ford, who backed off in pretended reluctance. "All right, all right. Whar you goin'? I'll go with you."

Paxton looked at him, then at the girl, then back to Ford. "It might be a good idea for you to come with me. That will stop you coming back here. I'm going across the road for a drink."

"Into the *Flyin' Hoss?*"

"Yes."

"Then I'm afraid I can't come with you. I just come from there. They don't like me in the *Flyin' Hoss.*"

"No one seems to like you any place," said Paxton. "Well, you can't stay here. Out you go."

Ford shrugged his shoulders, smiled at the girl, and went out reluctantly.

A moment later he popped his head in again. Paxton was bending over the girl—seemingly kissing her adieu.

"Aha!" said Ford. "No wonder you don't want me around. You're frightened I'll—"

"Get out!" roared Paxton, and pulled open a drawer.

"On my way!" said Ford, and vanished again.

HE WALKED along, smiling to himself. He came to a Chinese laundry, and the proprietor was standing in the doorway, getting a breath of fresh air.

"Kilgour's store?" asked Ford.

The man waved a hand further up the street on the other side, and Ford crossed the road and went along until he reached the place he sought. He went up the steps on to the porch, then went inside. It was a fairly large store and well-stocked. There were two youths behind the counters, and no customers at the moment. Ford was glad of that. The place was lit by three hanging lamps. The detective wandered idly across to one of the youths. "Give me fifty forty-fives, will you?"

"Fifty?" said the youth, turning to the cartridge bin.

"Yep," said Ford. "This town shore is expensive. If I keep on like I been doin', I'll need them fifty afore the night's out. Only arrived a few hours ago too."

The youth started to count the shells, while the other youth edged closer, his eyes on Ford. He noticed the dried blood on his cheek. "You been in a gunfight, mister?"

"Two, so far," said Ford lightly. "In the last hour."

The youth who was serving him lost count, and they both stared with bulging eyes. Ford pulled his gun from under his coat, jerked the chambers aside and started to poke out the cartridges he had expended. They counted the empty shells under their breath.

"Four!" said one youth. "You kill anyone?"

"Two. Some guy I never seen afore and Mike Dutton."

The youths gasped, and one dropped a handful of cartridges on the floor. "Dutton—you're the guy who killed Dutton!"

"Yep, but don't you go droppin' them rimfires about like that—they're likely to go off. Here, let me count 'em. You own this shop?"

"No—Mr. Kilgour owns it; we just work here. You want Mr. Kilgour?"

"Not particularly. He's got a daughter, ain't he?"

"He had one."

"What, did she die?"

"No, she run away, mister."

"That sounds interestin'," said Ford, putting the cartridges in his pocket, except for four which he thumbed into his gun. "Tell me about it."

"It was a few months ago now. She—" he paused as a customer came into the shop. The other youth sped away.

Ford threw some money on the counter to pay for the shells. "How old was she?"

"Seventeen. Real purty gal was Letty. Yuh see, she was runnin' around with a saloon owner named Lance Hart and the old man found out and thar was a big row and he beats Letty and Letty runs off. Then the old man gets purty mad—"

"And goes after her?"

"Nope. He just let her go. Said she had made her bed, so let her lie on it. I reckon he's sorry now, but he's an obstinate old cuss—don't you tell him I said so—but he is and—"

Ford saw a door opening behind the youth, and he coughed loudly and waggled his eyebrows. The youth shut up and stared at him with surprise. The door opened and a man about forty-three came through. He was grey-haired and wore his beard rather long. His eyes were fierce and rather sad. The youth heard the door close and swung round.

He came back to Ford. "Will that be all, mister?"

"Not quite. I wanta buy some paper, a pen, an envelope, and borry some ink."

"Yes, mister," said the youth, getting the required paper, pen and envelope. "You'll find ink right on that little table thar."

"Thanks," said Ford, paying for the articles, which he carried across to the table.

For awhile he wrote busily. The youths watched him with awe while Kilgour moved around listlessly, tidying the shelves after the day's trading. At last Ford addressed the envelope: *Joe Dent, 18 Wharf Street, San Francisco.* He placed the letter inside, pasted down the envelope with the brush and paste provided on the table, and carried the letter back to the counter.

"I see you take mails here," he said. "Would this letter go out on the mornin's stage?"

"Shore thing, mister. You want it expressed? That'll be a dollar."

Ford put the dollar on the letter and went out. The youth was reading the address with great curiosity.

Ford had completed his tasks. He had seen all Hart's enemies, learned a few things, and written a letter. He went back to the roomer, picked up his goods, paid his score, and went into a side door of the *Blue Moon.*

HE FOUND himself in a dimly-lit passage. He went along, seeking some stairs. A door opened suddenly to one side and a little ahead of him, and Ruby came out. She heard his steps and turned with a smile, but the smile froze when she saw who he was. For a moment, she seemed about to speak through clenched teeth, then she clamped her pretty lips shut and turned along the passage.

"One moment, miss," said Ford. "Where can I find Hart's bedroom?"

She turned again, just near the corner of the passage, and her eyes fell on

the saddlebags and bedroll. Her eyes filled with tears, and she turned away swiftly.

Ford realized he had said the wrong thing. He had told her he was moving in—and the room he would occupy had obviously been recently occupied by the late Mike Dutton. Ford shrugged and went on.

When he turned the corner, the girl had vanished. A passage ran each way. One way led up past Hart's office and on into the saloon. The other ran to another passage. Ford went along to Hart's office. He knocked on the door. "Come in," said Hart's voice.

Ford went in. Hart was sitting behind the desk. Ruby was standing beside it.

"I got my dunnage," said Ford. "Where is my room?"

The girl stared at Ford with smouldering eyes. Hart was pleased with himself. He winked at Ford behind her back. "The stairs run up the back of the building. Your room is marked 9. You'll find Dutton's stuff in thar, but heave it out into the passage. I'll get one of the boys to gather it. Dutton won't be needin' it any more."

That was sheer cruelty to the girl—and rather stupid, Ford thought. If Hart wanted to win this girl's love, this was certainly no way to go about it. He saw her cheeks pale as he turned towards the door.

"One moment," said Hart. "I believe you been busy."

Ford turned back to him and shrugged his shoulders. "I've seen your enemies."

"And killed one of Watson's gunmen?"

Ford nodded. "He got in my way. News travels fast in this town."

"That sort of news does. I hope to hear more of it."

Ford looked into his eyes. "From what I saw of Watson and his herd, you will. I don't like 'em a bit."

He went out, leaving Hart chuckling, and the girl standing there with pale face and baleful eyes.

He went down the passage, along a cross passage, out the back door, up the stairs, through another door into a passage, and found the room marked 9. He went inside and lit the lamp. It was plainly furnished, and very untidy. Ford was a very tidy man, like any other intelligent person. He started to clean up.

It was midnight when he finished. He had been doing a lot of thinking while he worked, but it was not getting him very far. He had, as yet, no clue as to who had murdered his friends and stolen the gold. And he did not like that; he had no time to spare if he was going to recover the money more or less intact.

He sat down on the bed and lit a cheroot. He was sitting there when there came a knock at the door. To his call it opened, and Hart walked in. He looked round the neat room with approval. "You been busy. What did you do with Dutton's stuff?"

"I parcelled it up and took it downstairs," said Ford. "I had to go down for a bucket and broom and so on."

"I was hopin' you'd scatter it over the passage. Ruby's room is on the other side o' yours and she mighta seen it. It woulda done her good."

"I never thought o' that," said Ford, although that was just what he had thought of. "So she sleeps in number 10, eh? I reckon I betta lock my door if I don't want a rattler slipped into my bed."

"Mebbe you had," said Hart, with a grin. "Wal, the sheriff's downstairs askin' for you. I come up to warn you."

"Warn me o' what?"

"One o' my boys tells me he's seen two of Watson's men hangin' round the place—outside. I thought the sheriff mighta been gonna lead you out, see. It might all be a putup job."

Ford looked at him. "Thanks. What about the back stairs?"

"They wouldn't expect you to be up-

stairs at this hour. They are out the front."

Ford got up, rolled down his sleeves and pulled on his coat. He settled the shoulders comfortably and placed his gun right. "Let's go down," he said, as he turned out the lamp.

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THEY WENT along the passage to the back door. Ford stood back to let Hart go first, but Hart hung fire. "Go on," he said.

"I thought you said thar was no danger at the back."

"I was just thinkin' thar might be."

Ford gave him a look, then flung the door wide. For a moment they stood there, then Hart stepped back and put out the passage lamp. They would be harder to see now. Ford nodded approvingly, then slipped through the door, keeping close to the wall of the building. He hung there for a moment, but nothing happened, so he ran quickly and quietly down the steps and leapt into the back door, Hart close behind him.

"I told you," said Hart breathlessly.

"Yes, you told me," said Ford quietly, and they went through the building to the bar.

The sheriff was awaiting them at the usual corner.

"You want me, Sheriff?" Ford said, and Holden swung round.

He stared at Ford for a moment. "Whar was yuh?"

"In my room."

"Hidin' out?"

Ford's eyes narrowed. "Look here, Sheriff. I hide out from no-one, least of all the law. Let's not you and me have trouble."

"Yuh don't seem to mind trouble. I hear yuh kilt another man tonight?"

"I guess yuh got it right."

"And this time it wasn't in fair fight."

"Who says so?"

"Watson."

"He would," said Hart.

"Leave this to me," said Ford. "You say it wasn't in fair fight. I walked into Watson's place and he has about five guns ready to go at me. I'm ordered out and as I goes, I'm called yella. Then some hombre goes for his gun and I let him have it. How does Watson explain all the bullet holes in his doors?"

"They fired at yuh as yuh was high-tailin' out. Look, Stranger, yuh come into this town to buy trouble, and I don't like trouble-hunters. I'm here to stop it. I can stop it by lockin' yuh up and seein' yuh outta town in the mornin'."

"You aim to take me out the front door?"

"Why not?"

"Aw, Sheriff," said Hart. "You can't be that loco! Watson sent you along here to bring Wilson out, and he's got his gunslicks posted out thar to fill him fulla lead—and you, too, mebbe."

The sheriff looked hard at Hart. "Is thet square?"

"Didn't you know?" asked Hart sarcastically.

The sheriff's eyes narrowed. "I didn't know. All right, we'll go the back way."

"But you can't do this," expostulated Hart. "Not on the word of a coyote like Watson. Wilson killed his man in fair fight—they're tellin' you a tale."

"Tale or not," said the sheriff, "while Wilson's in this town there will be war—and I aim to prevent it."

"You're bein' purty high-handed."

"Mebbe," said Holden. "I do as I think fit. Come on, Wilson. Give me yore gun."

"Not yet, Sheriff. Wait till we get thar. I might have need of it—and I'll promise I won't use it against you."

The sheriff gave him a sharp look, then nodded. "All right. Go first."

They walked past the scowling Hart, but that scowl vanished when he caught a wink from Ford. The two men went down the passage to the back door. Ford wondered if anyone in the saloon had left to warn Watson's gunmen that the sheriff was taking Ford out the back door.

"Go easy at that door, Sheriff."

He put out the lamp in the short passage, then flung open the door. All looked quiet outside. In the dim starlight, the stables and barns stood up against the grey sky like large brooding monsters. Their blackness might conceal many gunmen.

"It all looks quiet," said Holden. "Go on out."

"I'm goin'," said Ford. "And I'm goin'—fast!"

He shot out the door and started to run towards the corner of the building. A flash stabbed the darkness and a gun roared. A window crashed into splinters. Ford dropped flat and lay still.

"Who fired that shot?" roared the sheriff from the shelter of the back door. "It's the sheriff here!"

Silence followed his words. Ford started to move. He was near the corner of the building, and he could have slipped into the alleyway, but he had other ideas. His eyes were used to the dark now, and he guessed that he could see as well as the hidden gunman. He edged forward, towards the barn.

THE SHERIFF was shouting again, hurling imprecations out into the night, but not risking his own person. Ford wondered if he had now achieved his purpose—if that purpose was to get Ford out into the open—and was now trying to cover up.

He used the noise with advantage by moving a little closer to the barn.

A slight sound made him look over his shoulder and drop to the ground again. A rustle of grass told him that someone was coming along the alleyway. He twisted round, drew his gun, and watched the black space. Such alleys are always full of refuse, and soon he heard a foot send a tin can rolling.

He started himself rolling and fired into the alleyway at the same moment. There were two results. One was a curse from the alley; the other was a shot from the front of the barn. It had been aimed at the flash of Ford's gun, but Ford had been moving away, and it never even went close.

"Hey!" yelled the sheriff from inside. "What's going on out thar?"

The obvious reply would have been to invite him to come out and see.

Ford had stopped rolling, and now he twisted round and started for the barn again, holstering his gun and going forward on all fours, low to the ground.

There was silence now. The sheriff had gone inside, presumably to get his deputies and come round the back from another direction.

Without making a sound and with infinite caution, knowing that his life depended on silence, Ford went on until he reached the corner of the barn. One side was dimly lit, and he could see there was no one there. He looked along the front, but it was in pitch darkness. Then he stiffened.

A "Psst!" had come from the far alley. That was some distance away, right across the back of the building which stood before him, the lights shining in its windows. Now someone was in that alley—someone who knew the gunman at the back and was trying to tell him something. But the man in the alley would be keeping well under cover, just in case.

"Psst!" came the voice again. "Are you still thar? Get movin'. The sheriff is gettin' a bunch o' men together. I'm goin' now."

Again the silence fell, and Ford stood waiting. Soon he heard a slight sound towards the far corner of the barn, and he moved silently towards it. For a

moment, a man's figure showed as he slipped round the corner into the dim radiance coming along the side of the structure. Ford ran on his toes to the corner. He could see a man's figure moving away in a hurry. He drew his gun. "Hold it!" he called.

The man turned swiftly and brought his gun up. It never fired, because Ford's first shot sent the man spinning, and his second shot smashed him to the ground. Ford stepped back into the darkness of the barn front for a moment, then ran across the yard and swiftly up the stairs and through the upper back door.

A moment later, several men came running towards the yard from different directions, the sheriff yelling to all and sundry to stick up their hands.

Ford slipped along the passage to room 9. He opened the door carefully and went in. He did not light the lamp, but went across to the window and stood beside it, looking out and listening.

At that moment, one of the posse fell over the body of the man Ford had shot.

"Thar's a carcass here, Sheriff," he said.

The sheriff ran up. "Strike a match and see who it is," said the lawman.

A match flared. "It's Red Dugan," said a voice. "One of Hi Watson's men."

"Hmmm," mused the sheriff. "Then whar's Wilson?"

"We better look about," said a voice. "Mebbe his carcass is here some place."

They went on searching the yard, and Ford quietly got the only chair, took it to the window and sat watching them, while he wondered what his next move would be. He wanted to talk to Hart's men. They should have had many drinks now, and a few well-placed questions might start them boasting about the holdup—if they had done the holdup. It could have easily been Watson's gang. It could have been any gang.

He wondered if it was safe to go down into the saloon. But if he did so, the sheriff would soon be told and would come running, and he had no wish to waste his time in the calaboose.

At last the sheriff and his men retired grumbling. They scattered and commenced to comb the wilderness behind the town.

Ford sat on, pondering his problem, and dozing a little. He had been up since dawn and was beginning to realize it.

SUDDENLY, he stirred to life. He had heard a light footstep in the passage. He stood up quickly and moved behind the curtain which was hung across one corner of the room to serve as a clothes closet.

The footsteps stopped at his door. He stood waiting. After a moment he heard the handle turning, and then the door opened. There was a long pause while that someone peered into the dark room. Then the light click of female shoes moved to the bed. Another pause. At last the shoes clicked back to the door, went out, and the door closed.

Ford stepped out from the curtain, still listening intently as he followed the footsteps with his ears. They stopped at the next door and went inside. But the door did not close.

He began wondering. Was this one of the dance girls of the saloon doing a bit of petty pilfering—or was it Ruby, as he had thought at first. He could hear the girl moving about in the next room. He heard her push up the window.

His ears caught another sound. Someone was coming very cautiously up the back stairs. He slipped across to the window. He heard whispers—the girl was whispering to someone on the stairs. Were these two plotting his death? Was this Hart? But Hart would not need to whisper—and, in any case, the girl thought his room was empty.

He could not tell what was said, but a few seconds later, the man continued up the stairs. Ford would have had to lean from his window to see him, and the dim light was upon that part of the building. He kept still.

The man opened the back door, stepped in and closed it quietly behind him. Ford slipped quickly back behind the curtain. There was no need for that precaution, however, as the man's soft footsteps went past his door and into the girl's room. The girl's door closed. A mumble of soft voices could be heard.

For a moment Ford stood there. He had no wish to eavesdrop on a love affair. This might be Ruby after all, and she might be entertaining a man in her room, unknown to Hart, which would explain all the secrecy. Yet, Ford had to know what it was all about.

He placed his ear to the wall. It was ony a frame partition, yet the two were speaking quite softly, and Ford could catch only a word here and there. The tone did not seem like the accents of lovers—it was too quick and urgent. Once the girl raised her voice a little and he heard: "I tell you there's no one on this floor."

The voice was Ruby's. He strained to hear more. Later, she raised her voice again: "I don't care, I tell you, I don't care. I did it all for Mike, and now he's dead."

"Keep your voice down," said the man, but Ford could not recognize the voice.

The mumbles went on again. Ford gave up trying to listen and turned towards his door. He opened it very quietly, slipped out, and closed it behind him. Then he tiptoed down the passage, keeping near the wall to minimize the creaking of boards. He reached the back door, opened it, slipped out, and closed it behind him. He glanced up at the girl's window. There was no light there, so the two were talking in the dark.

He crouched close to the wall and went down to the yard. He took a cautious look round but all was quiet there, although there was plenty of noise coming from the main street, and he could even hear sounds of the sheriff's men calling to each other from the trees. There was a slight breeze blowing from that direction.

He leapt silently across the yard and stood in the shadow of the front of the barn. He waited.

He did not have long to wait. In less than five minutes, the upper back door opened and a man slipped out cautiously. He was just a dark shadow as he slipped down the stairs. Ford could see the pale oval of the girl's face in the open window above.

The man did not go up the alleyway. He continued on across the next yard, and Ford waited until he was almost out of sight before starting after him.

By the time he reached the next yard, the man dropped all secrecy. He straightened up and started to walk in an ordinary manner, which made it much easier for Ford to keep him in view and hearing.

They covered five backyards in this way, Ford darting from barn to stable, from stable to barn; flitting noiselessly across the open spaces, his eyes darting over the ground, but never being off his quarry for very long.

Suddenly, the man vanished. Ford stopped on one foot, peering ahead. He heard the latch click as a door closed. The man had entered some building. Ford moved on until he was behind the place. The yard was piled high with cases and other rubbish. Inside, it was dark. After a few moments, an upstairs window flashed into light. A man walked to it and pulled down the blind.

Ford slipped across the yard and up the side of the building. He wondered what this place could be. It was quite a large building. As he went, he placed the town in his mind.

Down at the other end of the street, on this side, was the *Flying Horse*. Op-

posite it was the Wells, Fargo office. That was about all he knew of the street.

He reached the sidewalk, moving naturally now, for there was still plenty of people in the street. He turned casually and looked at the front of the building, and he blinked a little as his eyes read a large sign, *Kilgour's General Store.*

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FORD WAS very thoughtful as he reached for a cheroot. He strolled along the sidewalk wondering what connection Ruby could have with Kilgour. It need not be Kilgour, of course—in fact, the man had moved like a much younger man than Kilgour. He could be living in the house. Who was he?

Ford found himself nearing the *Blue Moon* again. He paused and leaned against a porch pole of the building next door. He did not want to go back to his room yet. When the sheriff and his men had given up the search among the trees, they would look for him in his room. He would wait until that search was completed before he went back. At the moment, he was in the unenviable position of being hunted by both sides—Watson's men and the law.

He had not a friend in the town. He could not count Hart, because Hart might be the head of the gang who had done the stickup. He *could* take the sheriff into his confidence, but he was not sure that was wise. There had been plenty of crooked sheriffs in history, and Hart had said that the sheriff was in Watson's pocket. That might be pure spite, of course, but it might not. No, the sheriff was out.

There was one person whose aid he could enlist if he chose to reveal his identity and his purpose. That was the Wells, Fargo agent—George Paxton. He had seemed a good type of fellow. Ford wondered if he had yet learned that the man he had threatened to throw out of his office was a gunman! He chuckled at the thought. He did not feel like approaching Paxton then; the agent might be sore about that episode.

So it looked as though he would have to play a strictly lone hand.

His mind reverted to Kilgour. Here was a problem. How did Kilgour come into this, if at all? Ford decided to find out—and he would waste no time doing it.

He slipped into the shelter of the dark porch and threw his cheroot away as he heard voices coming along the alley. It was the sheriff and his men.

"I guess he's high-tailed it outta town," Holden was saying. "Wal, that suits me. It saves another buryin' in the mornin', mebbe. Yuh shore he weren't in his room?"

"Shore. Red Ruby was up thar and yelled out, askin' what I wanted, but I looked into Wilson's room and struck a light, but he wasn't thar."

They went along the street and turned into the saloon.

Ford yawned. He was very tired. He could do with a sleep. He grinned to himself, then slipped off the porch and went down the alley. He turned round the back of the building and crept up the stairs as quietly as he had crept down them. He opened the back door silently, closed it after him, and went along to his room. He had noticed that the light in Ruby's room was out. He did not stop at his door, but slipped across the passage to another door. He tried the handle and the door opened. He stepped inside and closed the door behind him. There was a key in the lock.

The window of this room looked out on the alley, and there was enough light for him to see that it was unoccupied. He turned the key in the door, walked

across to the bed and threw himself on it.

In a few minutes, he was sound asleep...

THE CHEERS of the crowd and the shouts of the driver as the morning stagecoach pulled out of Visalia woke Jack Ford. He opened his eyes and looked at the square of window. Outside, the sun was shining in one of those dry, sleepy hazes.

Ford looked at the window, and then he noticed the stage go by and realized that the time must be eight o'clock, which was much later than he had intended to sleep.

He got up quickly, straightened his crumpled clothes, and went across to the door. He put his ear against it and listened.

There was no sound outside. He unlocked the door and opened it gently. Directly opposite was his own room. The door was partly open. Someone had been in there. It may have been only someone searching for him, or it may have been someone searching his belongings. The latter did not worry him. His things contained no clue to his real identity, and there was little anyone could steal.

He slipped out the door and looked along the deserted passage. The doors of both Hart's room and Ruby's room were closed, and quite likely the saloonkeeper and the singer were still asleep.

Ford slipped along the passage to the back door, went through and down the steps. No one was about. The business of the saloon did not get under way until at least noon.

He left the stairs and continued on across the back yards, his eyes alert for danger, which included the sheriff or anyone who might inform the sheriff that Ford was abroad in the town.

At last he came to the back of Kilgour's Store. He walked quickly along the alley to the front of the building, and leapt up to the side of the porch.

Inside, he found a few customers being served by Kilgour and the two youths. The customers were mostly housewives and they paid him little attention. He walked across to some ready-made clothing which hung in a rack and pretended to examine the apparel, until he saw that Kilgour was free.

Kilgour saw him coming and stared at him with his hard, bitter eyes. "Yes, mister?"

"I wanted to talk to you," Ford said. "In private."

Kilgour looked at him keenly for a moment. "What about?"

"Letty."

The man's eyes flickered a little and a spasm of pain passed across his face and was instantly subdued. He lifted the flap of the counter. "Come through."

He led the way through a door into a small parlour and office, and waved to a chair. He dropped in one himself and fixed his eyes on Ford. "What do you know about Letty? Who are you?"

"My name's Bart Wilson. I come from San Francisco—only got into town yesterday. Last night I heard the name of your daughter—"

"She's no daughter of mine," said Kilgour quietly.

Ford looked at him for a moment. "I think she is. She has the same determination in her chin; the same strength in her eyes. She's your daughter all right."

Kilgour swallowed hard. "You've seen her?"

"Only a few days ago. Yes, I've seen her."

"She sent you to me?" There was an eagerness in Kilgour's tone which he fought to suppress.

Ford hated to blast his hopes, but he shook his head. "No. You see, she has an obstinate father, and so she was brought up to be obstinate herself. Darn fool thing, obstinacy. It stands in one's own light so often. Anyhow, I was tellin' you. I live in Frisco most o' the time, and I deal a lot at Parkinson's General Store. It is a well-run

place, and the prices are right. I been dealin' there a long time and I know all the gals who serve behind the counters. I sorta josh 'em along, you know—"

"Go on, man—go on!" said Kilgour impatiently.

"Wal, one of 'em is named Letty Kilgour, and if she ain't your daughter, I never seen a father and daughter afore."

The sadness had gone out of Kilgour's eyes. They were brighter, sparkling. He almost smiled. "You mean," he said, "she's not—"

"No. In spite of all you thought in your pigheaded way, she's workin'—she's earnin' a decent livin' in a decent way. So far as I know thar's no man in her life—except you, mebbe. Yet she has the same sadness in the back of her eyes that you have. I've often wondered about it, and when I heard the name of your daughter, I realized what it meant. I guess you were both fools, but you were the greater—"

Kilgour held up his hand. "Please! You can't tell me anything I haven't told myself. I'll go to Frisco and—"

"I don't think that will be necessary," put in Ford.

Kilgour stared at him. "What do you mean?"

"Last night I was in your store. I wrote a letter. It went out by today's stage. It was to a friend of mine in Frisco. He knows Letty, too. He and his wife will go along to Letty and will tell her that you have forgiven her and want her back. I think she'll come."

Kilgour gasped, and for a long time he sat staring at Ford.

"You're a mighty meddlin' young man," he said at last. "How did you know I'd forgiven her?"

FORD SHRUGGED. "I guessed," he said. "In any case, you've realized that you had nothin' to forgive. The gal was all right; she never did nothin'. It was you who did the wrong thing by beatin' her and forcin' her to leave you. No, you got to get her to forgive you, but I wouldn't put it that way if I was you. Youngsters are likely to get the bit beween their teeth if you're too soft with 'em. We gotta give 'em the value of our experience, but we gotta do it gently or they'll become harness-shy and go wild the first time we leave the corral open."

"You talk like an old man—and you're only a youngster yourself."

"I get around—and I keep my eyes, ears and mind open. Have you learnt a lesson in tolerance, Kilgour?"

Kilgour rubbed his forehead with the butt of his hand. "I hope so."

"Age and youth don't get on too well together," said Ford. "They got such different points of view. But it's a trouble that ain't hard to cure—and it's up to age to cure it. Youth ain't never been old, so it can't imagine what it would be like in future years; but age has been young once, and it can throw its mind back to those years and try to make the life of youth what it would have liked its own life to be. You see what I mean?"

"I see. My youth was a hard one. It seems I've been makin' Letty's the same."

"That's the bad that parents do. They say 'What was good enough for me is good enough for them', but that's not right. Times are changin' all the time; this is a different world to the one you spent your youth in. Someday Letty will marry some decent guy and bring your grandchildren into the world. You wouldn't like them to have hard lives, too, would you? Yet you started the trainin'. Is her room still vacant?"

"Of course."

"Do you live here all alone—you don't have no servants or lodgers sleep on the premises?"

"No. I've done the household chores since Letty left."

Ford had not expected this reply. He was thinking about the man who had talked to Ruby, and who had gone upstairs to the room at the back. He

felt sure it was not Kilgour himself—yet Kilgour said he lived alone in the house.

Kilgour stood up. "It's been mighty fine of you to come and talk to me, Mr. Wilson, I'm just a silly old man and I needed someone to talk to me like that."

"I hate wastin' time," said Ford as he rose. "If I hadn't thought it would do you good, I would never have come. I wasn't sure o' my reception, but I'm glad you took it like you did. I thought I might have trouble with you."

"Trouble?"

Ford did not answer that. "One can have lots of trouble one way and another. I've fallen foul of a man named Watson. Know him?"

Kilgour nodded. "He runs the *Flyin' Hoss*. A bad man. The town is full of bad men—saloon-keepers. There is another called Lance Hart, who runs the *Blue Moon*—him and his strumpet—"

"I met him, too," said Ford. "He mightn't be so bad as you make out, though he's bad enough. Got a gang, hasn't he? How many in it?"

Kilgour counted on his fingers. "There used to be Mike Dutton, but he was killed last night. Then there's Ike Flinders, Joe Sanders, Pat Ryan and Si Mason— he had five in his gang."

"And himself makes six," said Ford. "I suppose you could add in the barkeeps, too. And how many has Watson in his gang?"

Kilgour counted again. "Two of them were killed last night, I heard people say in the store. Tom Kinder was killed, and Red Dugan was killed. That leaves Jake Thomsett and Pete Rollins. That makes four Watson had in his gang—four too many."

"And Watson makes five," mused Jack.

"Only three now," said Kilgour. "They were all killed by one man—a fellow named Wilson. He—" The storekeeper stopped dead and looked at Ford. "Your name's Wilson. Any relation?"

"Couldn't be closer. I'm the same guy."

Kilgour's eyes hardened. "You're a gunman! Then all this stuff about Letty you've been tellin' me—"

"Hold hard, Kilgour!" said Ford. "I'm no gunman—at least, not the type you think. I can fight if I have to, but I'm no paid killer. And everything I told you about your daughter is correct. You only have to wait to see how right that is."

Kilgour searched his face for a few moments, then held out his hand. "I believe you," he said. "Perhaps because I want to believe you. And you have killed only men who aren't worth living. But isn't the sheriff after you? I heard that, too."

Ford grinned. "He's lookin' for me, but I got somethin' to do afore I lets him catch me. For that reason I'd prefer to use your back entrance."

Kilgour nodded. "Shore. This way."

He led the way to the back door, and Ford waved a hand and set off across the yard. He skirted round the empty cases and the stables. Behind the stables were the trees, for the ground had been cleared just sufficiently to allow building. He went into the trees and turned along parallel with the main street, travelling at a fair speed.

One question was agitating his mind. Why had Kilgour lied about the man who occupied the upper back room? He need not have lied. The man could have been a marauder; he could have been snooping. Yet, it did not look like that. The man had been quite open in his movements, and a snooper does not light a lamp.

Ford had decided on a course of action. There were several saloons in Visalia, but most were small places, and the proprietors did not have gangs of men at their disposal. The only ones with hired gunmen were the *Blue Moon* and the *Flying Horse*. He hoped that

one of those gangs had done the holdup, and he proposed to prove it—or else turn to some other direction. His main hope would be the finding of the gold. To send so much gold out of the town would be a tricky job until the sensation died down. Every miner was interested in that glittering stuff; therefore every miner would be working against the gang. It would have to be carefully hidden.

The vicinity of the holdup had been searched over a wide area, and the gold was not hidden there. It must have been brought back to town, and would be somewhere here. But where? That was the problem. The gang who did the job would want it where they could keep an eye on it. Tracks had shown that six men had been on that job—and each one of those six men expected a share of the loot. Each one of those men would want to know where it was, because there is no honour among thieves.

The conclusion was that the gold was hidden either in the *Blue Moon* or the *Flying Horse*. It would be a fairly easy job to look round the *Blue Moon*, but a very dangerous task to explore the *Flying Horse*. Yet it would have to be done.

He would try the *Blue Moon* first.

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HE ARRIVED opposite the back of the saloon and turned towards it. He reached the edge of the trees and looked out on the back of the barn and the space where Dugan had died from his bullets. He went quietly along the side of the barn, crossed the yard, and went in the back door.

Most saloons had a cellar; there was no ice, and a cellar was necessary to keep foodstuffs and liquor in a medium degree of coolness. Ford wondered how he could reach the cellar, for that would be a likely place to hide the bulky box, and he had to start somewhere.

He went along the passage, looking around for a door which might lead to a flight of steps. He opened several doors, but they were dressing rooms for the girls—and one was occupied by a sleeping damsel. She did not wake, so he closed the door again and went on.

He reached the door into the bar without finding any way to the cellar. He went into the saloon.

The two bartenders were cleaning up—sweeping up the sand and sieving it preparatory to spreading it out again. They looked up as he entered.

"Mornin'," said one. "Nice mornin'."

"Fair enough," said Ford. "Anyone been lookin' for me?"

The bartender grinned. "Only the sheriff—but he ain't been in this mornin' yet. He had half the town searchin' last night. You shore fooled him. Whar was you?"

"Just movin' around. Did he search the cellar?"

"No, but you wasn't down thar, because thar's only one way in and I was standin' on that."

"I thought of hidin' thar. How do you get thar? Trap behind the bar?"

"Yep. That's the most convenient, because we keeps our stocks down thar. It guards it wal, too. Thar's some thirsty hombres in this town would drink themselves silly if they could get in thar."

"I reckon so," said Ford. "Wal, I'm lookin' for a place to hide right now—somewhere whar Hart can find me if he wants me. I ain't done much work for my pay yet."

"You tombstoned Dutton, didn't you? That was worth a heap o' money to Hart."

"Do you think I might hide in the cellar till Hart wants me?"

The bartender laughed. "You thirsty, too?" he asked, but he led the way

round the bar, pulled up the trapdoor and pointed to some steps leading down. "You won't need a lamp, I reckon."

"I reckon I will. I don't wanta go fallin' over things."

"Take a candle," said the bartender, getting one from a shelf at the back and lighting it.

Ford took the candle and went down the steps. The trapdoor slammed behind him.

The cellar was a rough job; really nothing more than a large hole dug out of the earth with shorings to prevent it falling in. The walls and floor were earth, while the roof was made up of great beams and the floor of the room above. He could hear the bartenders at their work.

The place was packed with cases of liquor, comestibles, broken furniture and other junk. There was not much space to move. He carried his candle low and examined the cleared spaces of the ground. None of it had been dug recently.

One thing was not hopeful. If either of those bartenders had been in on the holdup—and they could have been, because it had taken place when the saloon was closed—then the money would not be down here. They would not have let him enter if it had been. Yet they may be quite innocent. Hart could have done the job without them knowing. He had enough gunslicks to make up the number.

He began to carefully move the cases and lumber....

TWO HOURS later, he was sitting on a box chewing some biscuits when the trapdoor opened. He blew out his candle and sat still.

Someone came down the steps and the trap closed. "Are you thar, Wilson?" the voice of Hart asked softly.

"Yep," said Ford, and lit his candle again.

The saloon-keeper came along the cellar and dropped on a box beside Ford. Ford took another bite of biscuit. "I ain't had a feed since last night and I got hungry," he said. "I found some stale cookies—"

"I forgot about food. I'll have a meal sent down to you. But you can't spend the rest of your life here."

"I wasn't intendin' to. What would you suggest?"

"How did you beat the sheriff last night?"

"Beatin' the sheriff was easy. I just dodged around. The sheriff don't worry me. But I don't like a slug in my back from Watson or one of his men. I'll come out again tonight."

"For what?"

"Again I ask—what would you suggest?"

"Thar's two ways of gettin' them off your tail. One is to beef the sheriff, and the other way is to beef Watson. If Watson was dead, he couldn't give evidence against you."

"I been thinkin' over that angle very serious, and it suits me. I'll call on Watson first chance I get."

Hart laughed and slapped Ford on the shoulder. "That's the idea! Then I can get his saloon cheap and I'll clean up a lotta money in this town—you and me both, because I'll need someone to watch things for me."

"Suits me," said Ford. "How's the course of true love movin' along?"

Hart laughed again. "Extra good! She seems to have learned her lesson at last, and she's bein' very nice to me. You see her?"

"Nope," said Ford, wondering what Ruby's little game was in being nice to Hart. "And I don't want to. How will I get outta this place without bein' seen once the saloon is open?"

"You can't; you better come upstairs with me and I'll hide you in my room."

"Now?"

"Yes. They're waitin' to open the saloon."

Ford rose. "Let's get goin'. And don't tell Ruby whar I am—just in case."

"I won't," said Hart, leading the way towards the steps. "Just in case."

They went up into the bar and then on upstairs to Hart's room. It was an over-furnished room, and the chest-of-drawers was covered with the pomades and scents which Hart affected.

"Make yourself comfortable," he said. "I'll have a feed sent up."

"Also some soap and water and a towel."

"Right. You stay here. No one would look for you here."

"Whar's Ruby?"

"Downstairs in her dressing room."

"She mighta seen us go past."

"Her door was closed."

Hart went out, and soon the food and the washing utensils arrived. Ford washed and ate as he thought about Ruby. The bartenders now knew where he was hiding, because one had brought up the food. If the girl had not heard them go past her dressing room door, she might have seen the food being carried. And he already knew that that girl could put two and two together.

He threw the towel on the washstand and went to the door. He eased it open and went out, passed his own door and stopped before the girl's room. He tried the handle. The door was locked. He stood for a moment in thought, then retraced his steps and went to the upper back door. He opened it a crack and looked out.

No one was in sight. He went quickly down the steps and into the yard. This time he turned in the opposite direction to Kilgour's. He was glad to be out of the *Blue Moon*. He did not like to be holed up in one place, and Hart might even be planning a trap. The girl would surely do so. No, he preferred no one to be certain where he could be found.

He went through a yard and into the trees again, keeping in the same direction. Soon he stopped and approached the edge of the trees, being careful to be not seen. Before him were the outhouses and the back of the *Flying Horse*. He examined it carefully.

He could see the kitchen and a Chinese cook working there. This place had its stairs in the side alley, and the back of the building was bare, except for windows and a back door. To reach that door without being seen in the bright daylight would be a hazardous proceeding. But it could be done.

HE STEPPED back into the trees and moved farther along until he was opposite the yard of the next place. He left the trees and crossed the yard, then walked along close to the back of the building, crossed an alley and reached the back of the saloon. The kitchen was on the other side of the back door, so he should be able to reach the door without being seen if he kept close to the wall.

He reached the open door without incident and peeped within. There was a passage. The first door to the left was open and led to the kitchen.

He slipped inside and moved along until he could peep round the kitchen door. The cook had his back turned. Ford went on.

He was on enemy territory here, and would have to be very careful. Somewhere ahead of him was the door into the saloon; the passage was lined with doors—three each side. They were all closed. One of them might lead to the cellar. The only way he could find out would be to open them.

He moved to the first, placed his ear to it and listened, his eyes watching the passage. At any moment a door might open and he would be discovered.

There was no sound from the door, so he opened it and looked inside. It was a bedroom. He closed the door again and went on to the next one, to repeat the procedure. Again a bedroom. He tried the third one. There was silence here, too, so he opened the door carefully and pushed his head inside.

He stared right into the startled eyes of Hiram Watson!

This room was an office and Watson had been sitting at the desk reading some papers, which accounted for the silence. He had seen the door open and looked up—to get a bigger shock than Ford!

Ford acted quickly. He pushed the door right open, leapt inside, drew his gun levelled it at Watson and, with his left hand, closed the door and pushed home the bolt. "If you call for help, Watson, that will be the last sound you'll make."

"What's the idea?" asked Watson shakily.

"Keep your hands in view on the desk."

"You come to kill me?"

"I should," said Ford, walking slowly across the room. "You tried to get me in a filthy enough way—first by tellin' lies to the sheriff and later by tryin' to drygulch me. I've cost you two men, Watson. Next time it will be you."

"Next time? You mean you ain't gonna beef me now?"

"Not if you play fair," said Ford, leaning against the wall in a position where he could see the window and door and Watson all at the same time.

Watson's eyes narrowed. "What's that mean?"

Ford looked at him for a long moment. "I want a share o' that gold!"

Watson stared at him, then blinked. "What gold?"

"The gold that you and your gang took off the Wells, Fargo express."

Watson blinked again. "You're crazy! What makes you think I got that gold?"

"I ain't sayin'; I only knows you got it cached away somewheres."

"You got the wrong guy," said Watson. "It was Hart got that gold—and you're one of them that helped him get it."

"You're guessin' badly. I had nothin' to do with that holdup."

"Then why you hornin' in?"

"I like gold. I want some of it. Unless I get some of it, I'm gonna do a lot of shootin' and them that has the gold won't live to enjoy it. You admit I can shoot straight, Watson?"

The saloon-keeper swallowed and nodded.

"Hot lead is very unhealthy for the brain, Watson," Ford went on. "Ain't it better to live and have some of the gold—than die and have none of it?"

"But I ain't got the gold."

"Then whar is it?"

"How should I know? I—"

A knock sounded on the door. Ford lifted his gun a trifle till it was pointing straight at Watson's eyes. The detective nodded his head towards the door.

Watson cleared his throat. "Who is it?"

"Jake, boss. I got some news." The door handle turned, but the bolt held the door.

Watson fixed his eyes on the unwavering muzzle of the gun in Ford's hand.

"I'm busy," said Watson. "Come back later."

"But we gotta act quick! Word has come through that Wilson is holed up in Hart's room. What you want us to do?"

Ford stepped across the room and pushed the muzzle of his gun against Watson's temple. He bent his head and whispered in the man's ear. "Ask him how he knows."

Watson's eyes darted from side to side and he seemed to be about to rebel, but the cold muzzle made up his mind.

"How do you know?" he called.

"The message came from Ruby—it's square!"

Watson groaned. Ford whispered again. Watson took a deep breath. "Two of you go along there and see what you can do."

"Shore, boss. Ain't you comin'?"

"I'll be along later."

"Right."

Jake's footsteps could be heard retreating. Watson sat very still as Ford backed off to his original position. "So

Ruby passed along the word, eh? Nice gal that! She works for both saloons, it seems. What's she in this?"

Watson wriggled. He looked beseechingly at the gun and slumped a little in his chair. "Why can't you leave me alone?"

"You ain't so chipper when the gang is not about, are you, Watson? What is the gal in this?"

"She's no more than I am. We take orders, that's all."

The words slipped out before Watson realized what he had said. He was a worried man, and his caution had eased a little. "Take orders from whom?"

Watson moved sharply. He had been tormented enough. His fear had now mounted until it was the desperation of the cornered rat. He threw himself sideways from his chair and tore out his gun as he fell.

Ford leapt towards him, intending to knock the saloon-keeper out with his pistol-barrel, thus saving noise.

But it was too late. The sprawled Watson had his gun out and up.

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FORD FIRED once, then sprang towards the door and tore back the bolt. He heard Watson's body settling down behind him as he pulled open the door.

The saloon had been quiet at this time of day and the shot had been heard. Voices were calling. The detective sprang out into the passage. The voices came from the saloon, and the back door was a long way off. He dashed across the passage, pulled open a door and sprang inside—to nearly take a header down a flight of stairs.

He had found the cellar stairs—and they were the last things he wanted to find at that moment. His intention had been to dash into a room, across it and out the window. Instead of doing that, he had trapped himself in the cellar. He pulled the door shut while he felt for a bolt. There was no bolt on this side. He heard men run into the office; heard their yells as they found the body of Watson, and then they were running along the passage searching for the killer.

Ford went quietly down the stairs, felt his way to a pile of cases and crouched behind them. A few minutes later someone shone the rays of a slush-lantern down the stairs and over the cellar.

"No sign of him here," a man said.

"Go down and see," said another voice.

"Go down yourself."

"Oh, he wouldn't be fool enough to go down thar," said the second voice.

The door closed and darkness fell again.

Ford was annoyed with himself. He had planned a nice little surprise for Jake and his companion. He knew exactly how they would work. They would be going along the back yards now, until they reached the back of the *Blue Moon*. Then they would go quietly up the back stairs, along the passage, and stop before the door of Hart's room. They would then suddenly fling open the door and blaze away at the man they expected to find there.

Ford had planned to follow behind them, so that when they stared into the empty room, he would be along the passage. He would call to them, and as they turned in surprise, he would mow them down. But that was not to be, now. He would not be able to leave the cellar until the hue and cry had died down, and by that time, Jake and his partner would be back.

He found a box to sit upon and sat down to wait. It struck him that this was just the opportunity he needed to search the cellar, but he had no light and he did not feel like it. He had a

new lead now. He felt sure the key to the whole business was Ruby. If he could make her talk—!

He spent the next half-hour thinking things over. That had been a very interesting remark of Watson's—"We take orders, that's all." And Ford's natural question had never been answered. Who gave orders to such men as Watson? Hart, maybe. And yet, Hart hated Watson—or he was a very fine actor. That could be, of course. Kilgour was tied up in this somewhere—perhaps he was the big man behind the gang. Ford felt satisfied in his own mind that the holdup gang had been closely associated with Watson. But who was the man higher up?

WHEN THE half-hour had passed, Ford walked up the steps and listened at the cellar door. There was no sound close handy. He turned the handle and pushed gently, for the door opened outwards, which should have warned him previously if he had not been in such a hurry. He pushed on the door—it did not open! The bolt had been shot!

Ford cursed beneath his breath, then paused as he heard a voice. Some men had come through the door from the saloon.

"I couldn't get here any sooner," said the voice, and Ford recognized it as the sheriff's. "I can't be everywhere at once. I was tryin' to pick up Wilson's tracks."

"Mebbe you was in the wrong place," said the same voice Ford had heard through the door.

"Yuh think he did this?"

"Wal, I come lookin' for Watson and his door was locked; he wouldn't open it. Mebbe Wilson had a gun at his head then."

"Quite likely," said the sheriff. "I'd like to lay hands on that Wilson hombre."

The men went into the office. Ford grinned. He was certainly giving the sheriff a lot of work. The grin faded from his lips as he wondered if the sheriff was all that he seemed. Then he thought of his own predicament. How was he going to get out of this cellar without making a noise? He wondered if Watson's gun had been put back in its holster to make his death look like murder, so he strained his ears to listen. The men had left the office door open and he could hear fairly clearly.

The sheriff was evidently looking down on the body. "Wal," he said, "he got a chance to draw, so it weren't murder. Anythin' stole?"

"Nothin' I can see," said Jake, "but it mighta been murder. Men have had guns slipped in their hands afore this."

"Shore. And this removes a witness against Wilson."

"I'm still here. I saw him kill Kinder in cold blood."

"Did you?" said the sheriff dryly. "In that case, I'd walk careful. Wilson is still roamin' about loose and he's much quicker on the draw than you, they tell me."

"I never thought he might wanta get me, too," said Jake, and his voice was very shaky.

Ford took a deep breath. Jake was a coward; he was the weak link in the chain. Now, if he could get hold of Jake and put on the pressure—! But just now there was a locked door in the way.

"Did you search the place for the killer?" the sheriff was asking.

"They told me they searched every inch—all the rooms."

"And the cellar?"

The men were in the passage again now and Ford drew his gun.

"Thar's the cellar door," said Jake, "and the bolt's shot. Wilson ain't so good he can close and bolt the door on the other side."

"I guess not," said the sheriff. "If it *was* Wilson. Watson had plenty of enemies. Did anyone see the killer come in?"

"No one I can find. He must've come

in the back way very quiet—mebbe aimin' to bush Watson."

"Mebbe. Wal, come on. I gotta get a posse out."

The voices faded away again. Ford relaxed against the door. Whoever had shot that bolt had done him a good turn—unless they mentioned the fact to the sheriff or Jake. Yet it was a backhanded good turn.

He went down the stairs again and sat on his box. He had been less than twenty-four hours in the town; he had killed four men; and there was a posse out after him. At least time was not hanging heavily on his hands. Yet he had no clue as to where the gold may be hidden or who may have killed the stage driver and messenger. The cold-blooded killer of Bill Souter may have been Watson, but he had nothing to say definitely that it was. It may have been Hart, or whoever was the man higher up.

AN HOUR passed with deadly slowness, then Ford stiffened. The cellar door had opened. Someone stood at the top of the stairs with a lamp. Ford peeped through the pile of cases.

A man was holding the lamp. He was wearing the apron of a bartender. Ford rose to a crouch.

The man came down the stairs casually. The saloon was still open presumably and he had come to replenish supplies. He left the door open at the top. He came level with the pile of empty cases which shielded Ford, and Ford heaved against them. The bartender gave a yell as the cases crashed into his side, sending the lamp flying and bringing darkness into the cellar. Ford was leaping up the stairs three at a time. He flew through the door, slammed it shut and shot the bolt. The bartender was shouting lustily.

Ford turned towards the back door and sped down the passage. As he reached the kitchen door, the Chinese cook appeared at it, but Ford sent him staggering back inside. The door to the saloon at the other end of the passage was torn open and someone yelled from there.

But Ford was through the back door and hoofing it as fast as he could go for the trees. Halfway on the journey, he changed his mind. They would expect him to do that, and he never liked doing what his enemies expected. He changed course and ran into the wide door of the stables.

There were horses here, and half of it was built as a straw loft. Ford swung himself into the loft, leapt behind some piled hay and dropped flat.

He could hear the hue and cry below.

"He made for the trees—the Chink said so—into the trees—watch out in case he shoots."

That last remark slowed the crowd considerably. They advanced more cautiously, but they did not come near the stable.

Ford waited until their voices died away, then lowered himself to the ground. He went to the stable door and looked out. There was no one in sight. Everyone had rushed out on the hunt.

Ford walked across the yard to the alley and up that to the street. It was mid-afternoon and a lot of people were moving there. His objective was the back of the houses across the street, where he would be less likely to run into anyone who would recognize him. He was waiting for an opportunity to cross the crowded road when his eyes fell on a building opposite marked *Wells, Fargo Bank and Express Office. Book here.*

An impish smile played around Ford's lips. He liked causing surprises. He ran across the road and through the door of the office of his company.

Things were quiet in there. The only person in sight was the female clerk. She looked up as Ford entered. "Yes, please."

"Don't mention it," said Ford. "I just called in to see if I could leave a ton of gold dust here."

She looked at him doubtfully and

rose from her chair. "You'd better see Mr. Paxton. I'll get him for you—he's in his office."

"Hold on!" said Ford. "I don't want to see musty guys like Paxton when you're about. What's your name?"

She edged towards a door. "I'll get Mr. Paxton—"

"What's wrong with me that you won't talk to me?" Ford asked. "I ain't a real rattlesnake, you know. That's only my long nose makes you think that."

She relaxed and smiled a little. "Your nose is not long," she murmured.

"Then come back and talk to me."

"I have my work to do."

"All right, Miss—?"

"Fremont—Mary Fremont."

"A nice name, too. My name's Wilson—Bart Wilson—I told you last—"

"Wilson!" she gasped. "You're that killer everyone's talking about."

"Not me," said Ford. "I'm just a harmless young man who's lonely. Must be someone the same name. It's quite a common one, you know."

The girl relaxed a trifle and came a step nearer. She giggled a little. "You don't look like a killer. Except for that mark on your cheek."

"I scratched it against a tree while ridin'," lied Ford. "Got a good job here?"

"Nice enough. Where do you work?"

"I'm lookin' for a job, but I've got plenty of money yet. How about you seein' me tonight, huh? Wal, no, not tonight— I'm likely to be busy. But perhaps tomorrow night if your boss don't mind."

She flushed a little. "What's he got to do with it?" she asked.

"Didn't I see him kissin' you last night?"

She looked in another direction. "Even if you did," she said, "that doesn't mean I liked it."

"Oho!" said Ford. "So Paxton is that kind of a guy, eh? He uses his position to push his love affairs. That's not nice, and a job ain't worth keepin' on those terms."

Her eyes came back to him. "A job's a job; and it's no business of yours."

"Not now," said Ford, "but it will be when you're my gal."

"Who said I'm going to be your girl?"

"I might decide it," said Ford, and looked across the office as the rear door opened and Paxton came in.

The agent pulled up dead at sight of Ford; then came on more slowly. "What are you doing here?"

"Just looked in to see a friend," said Ford. "But I'm goin' now, so you needn't throw me out."

Paxton stared at him and his eyes dilated a little. Ford guessed that Paxton had been told who he was.

"I wasn't intending to throw you out," the agent said a little unsteadily.

"Good. I'm glad I'm welcome. Wal, I'll be goin'. Adieu, sweetheart, I'll see you later."

He went out, leaving the girl blushing over her books and Paxton glaring after him.

He went down the side alley towards the back of the building, but halfway down he paused and looked back. Into the end of the narrow alley fitted a picture of some of the front of the *Flying Horse*. He saw Jake Thomsett come out the door and stand on the sidewalk. Jake looked across towards the Wells, Fargo office, then turned and walked up the street towards the *Blue Moon*.

Ford slipped back along the alley. It might be profitable to follow Jake and see what he could learn. He might even manage to get Jake alone—and he wanted that more than anything else in the world at the moment.

As he reached the corner of the alley he looked round. Paxton was standing in the doorway. Ford stepped out, waved a hand to Paxton and dived into the traffic. He reached the other side and set off after Jake.

Jake turned in at the door of the

roomer next to the *Blue Moon*. A minute later Ford followed. Jake was not in sight. Ford glanced into the office and into the eating room, but Jake was not in either. Perhaps Jake had a room upstairs. He leapt up the stairs quickly to the hallway above. Many doors opened from this, but they were all closed. He walked along slowly, wondering if Jake was in one of these rooms, and if so, which one.

Voices came to his ears as he passed one door, and he paused and placed his ear against a panel. He could hear two voices and he recognized them.

Gently he tried the handle. The door was not locked.

Suddenly he flung the door wide. "Howdy, Jake and Ruby," he said. "I didn't know you two was pals!"

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JAKE WAS seated on the bed; the girl on a chair. They had looked up at the opening door and when they saw Ford in the frame they tensed. The girl went white; Jake went a bilious shade of green. Ford was not holding a gun, but his hand was ready.

For a moment there was a dead silence, then Ford stepped inside and gently closed the door behind him, to lean against it.

"What do you want?" the girl asked huskily.

"I just wanted to join in the conversation."

"It's finished!" said the girl, springing up. "I'm going."

"Sit down!" grated Ford, and the girl sat. "Listen. I want a share of that gold that was taken off the Wells, Fargo stage, and I mean to have it. That's why I called on Watson today—and you know what happened to him. I'm shore you wouldn't like that to happen to you two."

"I don't know what you're talking about," the girl said surlily.

"Listen, my pet," Ford said evenly. "That gold has caused you a lotta trouble. You can get rid o' some o' that trouble to me. Thar's too many to share it now—but I can remove some and the shares'll be larger. You shoulda seen enough o' me to know that what I want I get—and I want a slice of that loot. You gonna play along with me, Ruby—or with dead men?"

Jake went a trifle greener and he looked at the girl apprehensively. The girl's eyes had narrowed and Ford could tell what was passing in her mind. She was thinking that perhaps she could play along with this interloper until her chance came to double-cross him. Then she wondered if that might not be too dangerous. At last hate stepped in. "I'll have nothing to do with you," she said. "You killed the only man I ever loved."

"You can love again," said Ford, "and I'm a better man than Dutton was— I proved it. But I'm through with words. Whar is the gold?"

The two were silent, Jake stealing little glances at the girl. Ford realized that they would never talk while they were together, but apart either of them might talk. "Were you in Ruby's room last night, Jake?"

Jake started. "Me!" he said. "What would I be doin' thar? Think I'm loco?"

"Someone was," said Ford, and the girl looked hunted. "I haven't told Hart about it yet. You see, I was in the next room. Yes, Ruby, my love; when you looked in, I was hidden in the clothes closet. Who was that man?"

"You know so much you should know that," said Ruby.

"I see how it is," said Ford slowly. "You can't cut me in till you see the boss."

"What boss?"

"Your boss. Wal, you two can knock

along now and I'll see you later—alone."

He stepped aside from the door and opened it. Jake and the girl stared at him, unable to realize their escape was open. Then the girl rose and went out quickly. Jake sped after her. Ford walked out the door and closed it after him as they were going down the stairs. He followed slowly and when he reached the foot they were nowhere in sight.

He had conceived an idea. The boss would learn about his visit to Ruby and Jake; he would know that either of them was likely to talk. He might have any one of many reactions, but he would be forced to come out into the open slightly.

Ford walked into the dining room. He was hungry again and he had little time on his hands. He expected a brisk night, with little time for eating.

It was not the regular meal hour, being between lunch and supper, but he managed to get the chef to cook him a large steak, which he ate leisurely, keeping an eye on the door for the sheriff or any other danger. Yet he was all alone for a full hour, for no one ever ate at that time.

IT WAS DUSK when he strolled out into the street and looked about him. He could move more freely as the sun went down, but he did not want to move much until dark. He strolled down an alley and went along the back of the *Blue Moon*. He crossed the yard, passed the barns, and went into the trees. He found a nice piece of sward and stretched out on it, taking his ease.

It was quite dark when he heard a distant scream. It had been a girl's scream and it had ended suddenly. He leapt up and started to run towards the back of the saloon. As he reached the yard, he saw two men and a girl run from the back door.

"It came from upstairs," the girl cried. "It sounded like Ruby."

The men ran for the stairs and Ford recognized Hart and Ike Flinders, one of his gunmen, in the light thrown from inside. He ran across to them and they heard him coming and paused, reaching for their guns.

"It's all right," called Ford. "It's me—Wilson. What happened?"

"Ruby or someone screamed," said Hart and ran onwards, the others following.

They all burst into Ruby's room together. She was the only one in it and the lamp was lit. Ruby was stretched on her face on the floor, and between her shoulders a long knife was embedded, its hilt quivering with her dying nerve spasms.

Hart ran across to her and gathered her up in his arms. Ford took one look and knew that she was unconscious and would never be conscious again.

The Boss had acted! Jake had told him about Ford's talk with himself and Ruby, and the Boss had decided to silence Ruby—and had done so.

"We better search the floor," said Ike.

"He had time to get away," said Ford. "But I got an idea."

He turned and ran from the room and out the back door. He clattered noisily down the steps, then ducked as he felt the wind of flying lead and heard the roar of a sixgun. He kept on going and another shot roared into the night and a splinter flew from the wall beside him. The shots had come from the barn, and instead of diving into the cover of the back door, Ford turned at the foot of the stairs and darted in short zig-zag rushes towards the barn.

A gun roared above his head and he glanced up and saw Ike there.

"They come from the barn," yelled Ike. "I saw the flashes."

Another shot roared from the barn door, which was partly closed. That one must have been a wild shot. Ford, on the run, and Ike from the window, fired together at the flash.

He heard someone running back into the barn and he threw a shot at the

sound, then he wriggled round to one side and crouched by the wall.

Silence fell in the barn, which was in pitch darkness. Something rubbed against Ford's back and he put round his hand and found the bars of some hames hanging there. They gave him an idea. He pulled the piece of harness down with his left hand, held it for a few seconds to get the weight, then threw it from him.

A moment later the hames fell with a jingling thud over to his left. Right before him a gun roared, aiming at the sound, and the red flash showed the face of a man. Ford fired at that face and he heard the man scream and his body go crashing down, taking the plank he was using for cover.

Ford walked carefully across the barn. He reached the spot where the man had fallen and felt around. His hand fell on something sticky. He prospected about. The man was dying.

The detective stood erect and struck a match. The light fell on a man lying on his back, a bullet hole just above one eye. Ford recognised him as one of Watson's gunmen—he presumed it was Pete Rollins.

"That you, Wilson?" a voice asked cautiously from the doorway.

Ford dropped the match. "It's me."

"Ike here. Did you get him?"

"Yes. Come here and see if you know him."

He struck another match and Ike walked in, looking around him carefully in case the gunman was not alone. He took one glance at the man on the ground.

"Pete Rollins," he said. "One o' Watson's gunslicks. So he done it."

"No, he didn't kill Ruby; why should he? He only works under orders and Watson is dead. But he was ordered by someone to stop here and prevent pursuit of the man who did kill her."

"Who's that?"

"I don't know—but I'm gonna find out. I wonder whar Jake is. He shoulda been here, too—unless he's dead."

"Why should he be dead?"

"He just might be. I'm goin' after Ruby's killer. You wait here in case Jake comes along—and don't kill him if you can help it."

FORD SPED off across the yards in the direction of Kilgour's Store, but as he approached it he slowed his speed and went more carefully.

Suddenly he stopped dead. A shadow had detached itself from a pile of boxes in Kilgour's yard. It was a big shadow and it crouched a little as it moved towards the back door of the store. In its hand was a naked gun and it was intent on its deadly business—so intent that Ford dropped a little of his caution as he moved quickly forward.

He reached the pile of boxes as the shadow merged into the darkness of the back door. Ford started to run, and he covered the yard in a few steps.

Inside the door it was dark, but he could hear someone moving in the passage ahead. He guessed where the shadow was going, and he was glad he had visited this place that morning, for now he had a plan of the building in his mind.

The passage turned a corner, and ahead of him he could see a crack of light growing. The shadow was opening a door very cautiously, and Ford judged it was the door of Kilgour's office. On silent toes he went on quickly. The door opened swiftly and the shadow stood there with raised gun.

"What do you want?" came Kilgour's voice. "Why are you standing there with a gun?"

"I want you!" said the shadow, and the hammer of the gun started to raise.

With a last leap, Ford was behind the gunman and the barrel of his revolver came down with a resounding crack on the shadow's hat and skull. Without a sound the shadow fell forward into the room, the gun clattering to the floor.

Ford looked into the room. Kilgour was sitting at the table, some books before him, his eyes wide with surprise and a receding fear.

"I reckon I just got here in time," said Ford, looking down at the unconscious Jake. "He had come to kill you."

"But why?" asked Kilgour, in a shaky voice.

"I can guess."

"Did you know he was coming to kill me? Is that why you're here?"

"No. I was coming to see you about something and I happened to fall across Jake's trail. His visit, I think, was connected with mine. You're a lucky man, Kilgour! It would have been nasty for Letty to come home for a buryin' of her father."

Kilgour mopped his sweating brow. "Yes—I'm lucky," he said. "Thanks to you. What did you want to see me about?"

"I wanted to ask you some questions, but now I can ask Jake instead. Have you any likker in the place? I want to bring him round."

He kicked Jake's gun into a corner of the room, dropped on one knee and found another gun, which he also put out of reach. Kilgour got some brandy from a drawer and carried it to Ford.

The fiery liquor put some life into Jake and after a few moments his eyes came open—but they were quite blank. Ford gave him another drink and then sat on his haunches for several minutes until sense came into the gunman's eyes and he frowned and rubbed the lump on his head.

Suddenly he recognised Ford and felt swiftly for his guns. When he found empty holsters he relaxed.

"Did you hit me?" he asked thickly.

"I had that pleasure," said Ford crisply, "and I'm likely to do it again at any moment. Don't try to get up, Jake, or I'll fill you fulla lead. Just lie there and answer my questions."

"I ain't answerin' no questions."

"Oh, yes, you are," said Ford, "and thar's two very good reasons why you are. One is that I know a few Injun tricks which are very painful, and the other is that if I don't get the Boss—and get him quick—you're a dead man!"

"What you mean?" asked Jake, his voice unsteady.

"You know very well. The Boss knows that I had that talk to you and Ruby today, because you told him. You also told him that I asked Ruby who was the man in her room the other night. Wal, things are gettin' desperate with him and he was scared either you or Ruby would talk. So he decides you both die. And he'll do it himself to make shore. He's told you to meet him somewhere—and then it's your turn. He's already killed Ruby."

Jake blinked. "Ruby's dead!"

"He knifed her in the back just a little while ago—and he's waitin' for you, Jake—he's waitin' for *you!* While he's alive and at large you don't stand a chance—he'll get you—unless I get him first."

He let that sink in, and he could see by Jake's expression that the gunman could see the sense in what he had been told. After a moment Ford went on. "Wal, Jake, are you talkin' or do I have to use torture?"

"What happens to me if I talk?"

"I ain't a sheriff and I don't care what happens to you—so long as you don't run across my path again. You got a hoss?"

"Yes, I got a hoss."

"Then after you talk you can get on it and ride—and keep ridin'—high and handsome. Now talk."

"What about?"

"The Boss. Who is he?"

"The Wells, Fargo agent—George Paxton. He planned the whole thing. He knew the big shipment was goin' out—he knew a week ahead. It looked like a big cleanup if it could be brought off. He needed gunmen,

though, because he ain't no gunman. So he puts it up to Mike Dutton, and Mike, bein' like he was with Ruby, brings her in.

"Wal, Paxton did most of his drinkin' and gamblin' at Watson's and he also put the idea to Watson. Watson says that to make a success of the job they will want more than two gunslicks—more'n him and Dutton, I mean. Dutton don't trust Hart's boys, for he knows Hart is workin' against him because of jealousy. So Watson brings in Pete Rollins, Tom Kinder, Red Dugan and me."

"I see," said Ford; "that makes the six. Paxton stays at home, I gather."

"He had to get the stage away with the shipment; he had to be right here in town. We six left town afore sunup and takes our spot. The stage comes along to time and Watson and Dutton take the centre of the road. We other guys split up, two each side. Then Winslett refuses to stop and we lets 'em have it."

"Someone shot Bill Souter in cold blood; who was that?"

"That was Watson. Souter was only wounded, so Watson finished him off. Then we loads the gold on a packhorse and brought it back to town. It was daylight then, so we cached it in the scrub until the night. That night we brought it in."

"And where is it now?"

Jake chuckled wryly. "Right in the corner of the Wells, Fargo strongroom, covered up with other stuff, o' course. It couldn't be in a safer place. In a couple o' weeks Paxton was gonna work us our share."

"Then it is still intact?"

"Unless Paxton has been nibblin' at it. We was gonna take our shares one at a time to Frisco to change into dinero. Everything woulda been hunky dory, but you came along and started puttin' in your spoke. You killed the boys one by one and now thar's only Pete and me left—and Paxton."

"I killed Pete tonight," said Ford.

Jake gasped, and his green complexion came back.

"But why should this man came along here to kill me?" asked Kilgour.

"Last night a man called on Ruby secretly," said Ford. "I was in my room and saw and heard things, but not enough to recognise the man. That man visited Ruby tonight, and she told him I had been there. He would work it out that I might have followed him when he left—which was just what I did do—and he remembered he came along here from Ruby. He expected me to ask you who he was—and he didn't want you to tell. So he sent Pete to kill me, went himself to kill Ruby, and sent Jake to kill you. Isn't that right, Jake?"

"That's right," said Jake. "Quite the detective, ain't you?"

"Yes," said Ford dryly. "That's just what I am—a Wells, Fargo detective!"

Jake gasped. "Jumpin' rattlesnakes!"

"Paxton comes in and out of this place as he likes," said Kilgour. "He is one of the best clerks in town, and he keeps my books. When Letty left, I hired him to do that, and set a room at the Wells, Fargo office and keep my books up-to-date. I heard him come in last night but I took no notice, thinkin' he was comin' to do some work."

"The extra money was handy until he could get at the gold," said Ford. "Mr. Paxton has expensive tastes. Wal, I've almost done my job. There were eight people concerned in that holdup and murder, and six of 'em are dead. You, Jake, are the lucky one—and I hope you realise it. You can ride—and you *will* ride. I'm goin' along now to get that gold—and Paxton! Whar did you have to meet him?"

"The back door of the Wells, Fargo buildin'."

"Daring!" said Ford. "His idea was to shoot you and say you were tryin' to break in. Wal, I'll be thar instead."

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FORD SAW Jake Thomsett off the premises by the back entrance, giving him his guns after they had been emptied, and watched the gunman making for the livery stables to get his horse. Jake was taking no risks and was not going to wait to get his few belongings. He was properly scared—both of Paxton and Ford—and Ford did not expect any more trouble from him.

The detective turned up the alley beside the store and went to the street. He still had to keep an eye out for the sheriff. Yet he was in a hurry, for Jake was about half-an-hour late for his appointment, and Paxton might suspect something had gone wrong.

Ford took a cautious view along the street, but the sheriff was not in sight. He darted across to the opposite sidewalk and went along. He had no intention of going to the back door of the Wells, Fargo building to be met by a fusillade of bullets; he was going in the front way. He had noticed a door in front of the counter that evidently led to the back of the premises.

He came to the open door of the Wells, Fargo office, settled his gun in position, and went inside. The only person in the office was the girl. She looked up, saw who it was, and her eyes became frightened. "Howdy, Mary, my love," said Ford lightly. "Is the boss out the back."

"No. He was out there some minutes ago, but he came through and went out."

"Whar did he go?"

"Are you really Bart Wilson, the killer? He said you were and—"

"Whar did he go?" Ford asked sharply.

The girl jumped. "I—I don't know. He didn't say. He just hurried through. Honest, I don't know where he went."

Ford lifted his head sharply as three shots sounded on the night air. They were not close, but quite clear to his hearing. Ford dashed to the door.

Further down the street people were running towards one spot. It was the livery stable.

Ford started to run, too, and he could run fast. He passed many others, but a crowd was in the livery stable when he reached there, and he had to push his way though. He found himself beside Ike Flinders.

"What happened, Ike?" he asked.

"I ain't shore," said Ike. "The liveryman says that Jake Thomsett came in, threw his saddle on his hoss and rode out the back door. Then thar's three shots outside—"

Ford pushed his way onward. Thomsett had had empty guns. The detective came to the back door. A short distance away a knot of men were clustered around some object on the ground. Ford hurried to them.

"Who is it?" he asked.

"Jake Thomsett," said the man he addressed. "He's got two slugs in him. Someone drygulched him as he rode out and let him have three slugs, but missed with one. The other two fixed Jake—he's dead."

"I guess you might know something about this, Wilson," said another man. "You killed most o' Watson's gang—includin' Watson. You better wait till the sheriff comes."

"Don't be a danged fool!" snapped Ford. "I ain't no drygulcher, but I know who is—and I'm goin' after him—and you better not try to stop me. When the sheriff comes, if he's lookin' for me, tell him to see Walt Kilgour—he'll explain."

He hurried away from the bunch, who stared after him, growling, but making no other move.

FORD WENT across the yards and soon started to run. He wanted to warn Kilgour, in case Paxton made in that direction. Paxton was on the prod now, but he had killed Jake too late. Jake had told the whole story—before two witnesses. Paxton's only chance was to silence those two witnesses—quickly. The mere fact of Jake being free and taking to flight would tell him that Jake had talked.

It was a good run to Kilgour's place and Ford was breathing heavily when he reached the back door. He paused there and took a look round. Everything seemed quiet. A murmur of voices came to him from inside. He slipped through the door and went quietly up the passage and turned into the cross passage. The door of Kilgour's office was open and the light was streaming out. It was from there that the voices came.

Ford moved forward slowly, listening.

"So you're going to die, Kilgour," said a voice, and Ford recognized the voice of Paxton. "Yes, you're going to die, and so is that skulking detective."

"I'm sorry I told you he was a detective," said Kilgour; "but I thought it might make you see you have no chance."

"I have every chance. With you and him and Jake dead, who is going to say I had anything to do with the stage holdup? Not a soul."

"Wal, if you're so set on killin' me, why don't you do it?"

"All in good time—all in good time!"

Ford was at the door now, and he peeped in. Kilgour was sitting at the table and Paxton was standing square in the centre of the room—his back towards the door. Ford stepped inside. "Don't move, Paxton! I've got a bead on your brain."

Paxton turned slowly, a smile on his face. "Have you really?" he said coolly "Well, you were a long time coming."

Ford took another step—then a gun was jammed into his ribs! His head swung swiftly—and looked into the eyes of Lance Hart.

"Drop your gun, Wilson." said the saloon-keeper icily. "I got a bead right on your heart."

For a moment Ford hesitated, then he dropped his gun. He had walked right into a trap and there were two guns on him—the one against his side and the one in Paxton's hand. He could have killed Paxton, but he would have died at that moment—and while there's life there's hope. Also, he was surprised, and he wanted to know where Hart came in—even if it was the last thing he ever learned.

"You walked right into it, Wilson—or whatever your name is," said Hart. "You ain't so clever as you think. You didn't know that I was the silent partner in this business—that it was me did all the plannin'. No, you didn't know that, because only George knew. You fell for all my baloney about bein' jealous o' Ruby and settin' you on to kill Dutton and Watson and the others. Every one you killed left more money for Paxton and me. You see, you was doin' just what I wanted.

"George came to me first when he got the idea of the stage holdup and I cooked up the scheme; but I told him to keep me out of it and tell none of the others it wasn't his own idea. The reason for that was simple. We was gonna use certain people to pull off the job and later on, we was gonna dispose o' those people the best way we could. I'd have to keep dark to catch 'em unsuspectin'. We needed 'em for the job, but we wouldn't need 'em after, and I had certain little plans to obliterate 'em until only George and me was left. Then you came along, and I changed my plans. You did all the work for me. And you thought you was clever.

"But who's the clever one now? When we blast you to Boothill, thar won't be a soul who knows a thing about this. You thought Ruby was spyin' on you and passin' the word along

to Watson—but it was me who told her, casual-like, whar you was. Think back, Wilson, and you'll see I was behind a lot of your trouble. It was me led you to the sheriff, too."

He laughed. "Oh, it has been prime, Wilson, prime. And you never suspected me—or, if you did, you soon dropped me as being above suspicion. I was outside tonight when you followed Jake in. I could have shot you then, but I let you go. I wanted a surer way, and I wanted you to kill Jake. I went along and told Paxton, who was waitin' to get Jake at the Wells, Fargo office. I slipped round the back and told him, then he went through the front way and come on here. I went down to the livery and took up cover to wait for Jake.

"It was a simple plan. Paxton was to come along here and hold up Kilgour; if I didn't come within a few minutes, he was gonna kill the storekeeper and meet me later. But if things worked out as I guessed—and they did—when you heard my shots you'd go to the livery, find out Jake had been bushed, then come runnin' on here to warn Kilgour. I certainly know the way you think, don't I, Wilson? I shot Jake and ran here, takin' up my place beside the open door—and you come along, right to schedule. You thought Paxton was the only one left."

"We better hurry," said Paxton.

"No hurry," said Hart. "This is the happiest moment of my life. Let me enjoy it a while longer. I don't suppose I'll have another chance to get a gunslick of this guy's class on the end of a gun and show him just how clever he ain't. Wal, you got anythin' to say, Wilson?"

"Not much," said Ford, "except you ain't gettin' away with this. When my carcass is found thar'll be a cleanup in this town."

"That won't worry me," said Hart. "I'm a rich man."

"Also, you ain't so clever. You guys never are. You are so shore of your plans you never leave anythin' to chance—and that chance is gonna mean the end of you."

"What chance?" said Hart, his eyes narrowing.

"Listen," said Ford quietly.

The room fell into silence. Into that silence came the voices of several men, drawing nearer.

No one moved in the room. The voices became louder and then feet were tramping up the rear passage.

"What is it?" whispered Hart.

"The sheriff and his men," said Ford. "I left a message at the livery that he would find the explanation at Kilgour's."

He leaped suddenly sidewise, his shoulder bashing into Paxton and sending him sprawling and the gun flying. Hart fired, but Ford was no longer on the end of the gun. Hart swung to aim again.

At that moment Kilgour sent the table over—and the lamp with it.

IN THE LAST flash of light Ford sprang at Paxton and wrapped his arms around the agent. They crashed down together. Hart fired a shot in their direction.

"Don't shoot, Lance, don't shoot!" Paxton cried. "You'll hit me—and you can't get the gold without me."

That was sage advice, so Hart did not shoot again. He decided on flight instead, but found the passage was full of shouting men.

Ford and Paxton had rolled into a corner, fighting savagely. Paxton was trying to get away, but Ford hung on. Paxton rolled him over and Ford felt something under his shoulders, and knew it was Paxton's gun. He threw the man from him, twisted quickly, grabbed the gun and sent a shot crashing through the darkness at the spot where he had thrown the agent.

Paxon yelled. A shot came from near the door and the bullet hummed past Ford's ear. He fired again and again. The sheriff and his men were running

away from the door, yelling curses and warnings.

Silence fell. Ford climbed carefully to his feet. The shuffling of feet ebbed away to nothing in the passage.

"Is that yuh, Wilson, up to yore tricks again?" yelled the sheriff. "I won't lose yuh this time. I got seven men here. Come out with yore hands up."

"You come in, Sheriff," said Ford, striking a match and holding it away from his body.

The room was a mess. Kilgour was crouched behind the table-top, which was upended.

"You all right?" asked Ford, and Kilgour nodded and stood up shakily.

The faint light showed Paxton against one wall, a limp figure with blood welling from a wound in his stomach. He was still alive and conscious, but helpless. He would never live to hang. Near the door, Hart was a huddled heap and very still. Ford reckoned that he had two bullets in him somewhere.

"Yuh come out here—with yore hands up!" called the sheriff cautiously.

Kilgour went to a shelf and reached down another lamp. Ford's match went out, so he struck another and set it to the wick of the lamp. He set the table on its legs and Kilgour put down the light with shaking hands. "That was a lively minute," he said.

"About a quarter of a minute," said Ford. "You call the sheriff in—he thinks I've murdered you."

"If yuh don't come out soon, Wilson, I'll rake the place with slugs," yelled the sheriff, keeping under cover of the corner of the passage. "I got men all round the building."

"That's not true, Sheriff," said Ford, "and I could go out this winder if I had a mind to. But I ain't. I done what I came to do and you can lock me up if you like. And I ain't killed Kilgour—"

"Indeed he hasn't," called Kilgour.

"He's saved my life twice tonight."

"I don't believe it," said the sheriff. "Savin' lives ain't his habit. What was all thet shootn'? Who has he killed this time?"

"Come in and see," said Kilgour.

THE SHERIFF pushed his head round the corner. Also a gun. Then he stepped out and came cautiously forward. Ford had picked up his own gun and put it in its holster. He grinned at the sheriff. Behind the sheriff came his deputies.

"Put up yore hands!" said Holden.

Ford put them up. The sheriff glanced at Hart and Paxton with bulging eyes. "So yuh beefed two this time, eh? What are yuh—a killin' maniac? Keep a gun on him, boys."

"You got things wrong, Sheriff," said Kilgour. "Wilson is not a killer——he is a Wells, Fargo detective, sent

here to clean up the mystery of the stage holdup."

"Huh? What's that yuh say? Wells, Fargo detective? I don't believe it."

"You can easily prove it," said Ford. "Those two men were part of the gang —and so were the others I killed. And I know whar the stolen gold is. You can easily check up on me. My name's Jack Ford."

Yet it took a lot of talking on the part of Kilgour and Ford to convince the sheriff of the truth—and then he seemed disappointed. He rubbed his chin and stared hard at Ford, with one eyebrow lifted. "Yuh aimin' to kill any more buzzards?"

"Not me! I'm a peaceful citizen, I am, and I'll be leavin' town as soon as I can. See you later."

He pushed his way out of the room. The sheriff looked after him. "Mighty chipper young feller thet," he said.

"He certainly put some life in this town," said a deputy.

The sheriff looked at him. "If he stayed here much longer there'd be nothin' but death in it."

Ford went along to the Wells, Fargo office. From the distance he saw the girl standing in the doorway looking towards the crowd round Kilgour's store. She saw him coming and went inside. When he entered she was sitting at her desk. He walked through the gate and into the office.

"You can't come in here," she said. "Mr. Paxton—"

"Don't worry about him," said Ford, sitting on the corner of her desk. "I want the keys to the strongroom. You see, I work for Wells, Fargo, too, and I'm the only Wells, Fargo man worth mentionin' in town right now. So, until someone else comes along, I'm your boss—and I hope you're gonna treat me as well as you did the last boss. After all, a job's a job!"

★

2 FAST-TRIGGER, COMPLETE NOVELS 2

Unless that marshal would take the handcuffs off Doc Melody, then everyone waiting at this isolated station would find themselves at

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He knew the evidence against him was framed; and if he could stay alive, that very evidence would trap a killer. But time was short, and Toma slated for assassin's bullets, now that she had no further use to those who had murdered her father.

VERMILLION KID

Rangeland Novelet

by Lauran Paine

TO A MAN from a cesspool, the gutter is heaven. Those were the words. He turned the whiskey glass around and around in its own little sticky pool of clear liquid, on the bartop, and thought of them. If a man had said them he'd have killed him—shot him down with the ferocious fury of a selfmade gunman. Called, drawn and shot, all with the unbelievable speed that had made him feared, hated and fawned-over the width of the raw, rude frontier.

But it hadn't been a man; it was a girl—a slip of a woman at that. Not over a hundred and .ten pounds of fragile, violet-eyed, taffy haired girl. The kind that made heros out of their men while they, themselves, lived and died unsung. Real Western woman.

He couldn't get the words out of his mind; they were sort of poetic. "To a man from a cesspool, the gutter is heaven." Why, damn her, anyway. Her father was Buff Dodge. Big, wealthy, gruff and friendly—one of the richest cow men in the whole wide West, which, of course, meant the whole damned world. To hell with her Old Man and his money. The Vermillion Kid was pretty famous, too. And he had money—although no one but himself knew it.

He slid the whiskey glass along, making the little pool take on an oblong, roughly heart-shaped outline. He knew what she'd meant, though. He nodded slightly, morosely. There was a difference all right; sure there was. He was an outaw. That the law had never caught him didn't alter the facts one damned bit. She knew it, and he knew it and, he surmised tartly, so did the whole damned world. Even so, it sure hurt, when he'd tried to scrape up an acquaintanceship to have her drown it with a sentence like that. He downed the whiskey and turned bitterly away from the bar.

The *First Chance* saloon was a bedlam of noise, pungent odors of tobacco, liquor and human sweat. The Vermillion Kid grinned wryly, sourly, to himself as he made his way through the press of raucous, writhing bodies to the faro table. He gambled with his usual indifferent luck and the warmth of the room—generated by the hissing, glaring lanterns; the feverish, recklessly hilarious patrons; and the dingy, worn little iron stove in a far corner—made a small wreath of sweaty beads

"Don't move," came Toma's voice as the Kid stepped into the room.

stands out on his upper lip and his forehead. His slate grey eyes were somber, constantly moving over the room with a liquid, smooth movement and a look of sardonic ridicule had settled over his tanned, lean cheeks.

He marshalled his chips and counted them unconsciously, always conscious of the toss of that taffy hair and the proud, piquant face, and then the dagger of the words spanked up hard against the back of his forehead.

"To a man from a cesspool, the gutter is heaven." He quit the game, had another drink and stalked out of the saloon. The night was warm and clear, with little tremors of coolness settling down on the earth after the vicious heat of the day. He went to the Royal House, hiked the stairs to his room, locked the door very carefully, and went to bed with the same ten words of contempt drenching him with their frigid repugnance.

At breakfast the following morning, the Vermillion Kid's badly-mauled

pride had shielded itself behind a mask of indifference as it always did. In fact, he was pretty well along in the process of forgetting the whole damned episode—or so he told himself, when the hotel clerk came up to his table. He was the only occupant of the dining room and the man clearly showed that he had to talk to someone. The Kid motioned to a chair as the clerk hesitated. "Sit down." The clerk sat with a slight, self conscious nod of thanks.

"Sure's too bad, ain't it?"

The Kid knew the routine. He was supposed to look up, perplexed, and ask what was too bad? He shrugged instead, deliberately, and pointed to his thick plate of ham and eggs. "You had breakfast?"

The clerk was deflated. "Ain't hungry." He tried a more natural approach. "You hear what happened, last night?"

"Nope; don't reckon I did." He continued to fork the food into his mouth.

"Some cowboys ridin' back out of town come across Ol' Man Dodge's body, plumb shot all to hell an' stiffer'n a ramrod, about two miles out o' town."

AT THE name of Dodge, the Kid's soft, nervous fingers laid aside his eating utensils. His grey eyes came up smoky and he chewed methodically until he swallowed, looking at the clerk. "Well, what's the rest of it?" There was a sudden earnestness in his voice that the clerk didn't fail to recognize. He shrugged, anti-climatically.

"Ain't nothin' more. Them riders jus' found the old guy shot to death; that's all." The last came tartly, a little indignantly, as though the clerk resented the Kid's calm, steady eye and relaxed manner. He excused himself, got up, turned with a slight frown, and walked out of the dining room.

For possibly fifteen seconds the Kid didn't move, then he got up, pulled his hat absently onto his head, flipped a ragged piece of paper money on the table and walked out of the hotel into the blast furnace sunlight that was firing its molten wrath down upon Holbrook. Without seeing, he looked up and down the lone, ragged, unkempt street and turned toward the livery barn.

A hostler got his horse and the Kid saddled up, mounted, flipped a piece of change to the whiskey wrecked old sot who had gotten his horse, and rode out of the barn. He turned down the hot roadway with its tiny, whirling dust-devils that jerked to life under his big black gelding's freshly-shod hoofs, and out of Holbrook, heading north, toward the vast D-Back-To-Back, Dodge ranch. The bleary eyed hostler looked from the coin in his hand to the disapperaring rider and his filmy eyes were incredulous. He held a twenty dollar gold piece in his hand—more money than he'd had since he'd been a top rider for the IOI, nearly fifteen years before. Twenty golden dollars to hide in his filthy rags until it burned a livid hole in his pocket that'd match the searing ache in his ravished body, for whiskey.

As the Kid rode toward the tremendous Dodge holdings, his mind went bitterly, fleetingly, to the ten little words that had hurt worse than anything that'd been said to, or about, him since he'd carved his own violent, mysterious, arc across the firmament of the frontier. He more than suspected that his intended offer would be bluntly, savagely refused by Toma Dodge. Still, he wanted to make it—perhaps so she'd hurt him again. He wasn't sure why, but he fully intended to make the offer, anyway.

AS THE KID rode leisurely toward his destiny, back in Holbrook there was an explosive and profane council going on in Sheriff Dugan's office. Emmett Dugan was grey and grizzled, hard and indifferent to everything except his job as sheriff of Concho

County. He was a brooding bachelor, fiery of tongue and rough in appearance. The man opposite him was articulate, dark and handsome in an oily, unprepossessing way.

"I don't know when he come in, Sheriff. This mornin' when I got down to the barn, Bob had put him in a stall and doctored him. He's down there now, if you want to see him."

Dugan got up slowly. "Well, let's go look. Don't see how the dang critter can be alive, though, if he's shot like you say."

Side by side the big forbidding-looking sheriff and his smaller, immaculate-looking companion walked down the protesting plank sidewalk to the livery barn. The dark man led up to a gloomy stall where a powerful bay horse stood forlornly in a shadowy corner, head down, lower lip hanging, breathing with bubbling, rasping sounds. The marks of a recently-removed saddle were still outlined on the beast's back. Dugan opened the stall door and went up to the wounded horse. Les Tallant, the livery barn owner, went in with him and pointed to a ragged, swollen and purplish hole.

"Right through the chest." His voice was unconsciously lowered. The horse didn't look up. Dugan walked around the horse studying the wounds. The animal had been struck a little forward of the left front shoulder. Already a bloody scab had formed over the torn, swollen flesh. Dugan walked softly over the straw bedding around to the other side shaking his head. He looked thoughtfully at the hole in the wounded saddle animal for a second, then turned and went out of the stall. Tallant followed him out, latching the door behind him.

"It's Buff Dodge's big bay, all right; I'd know that horse anywhere. He prob'ly ambled into town an' come to your barn because he remembered that's where Buff used to leave him when he come to town. Damn." The sheriff shook his head wearily, sadly. "Ol' Buff was one o' my best friends." That was as close as Emmett Dugan ever came to showing emotion.

Les Tallant wagged his head back and forth a little and the opaque black eyes were impassive. " 'Course Dodge carried money on him, usually more than was wise—but dammit all, it's hard to think of anyone who'd kill him to get it."

"Oh, I don't know, Tallant. They's two kinds of owlhooters. They's the kind that'll hold a man up fer his dinero, an' then there's the kind that'll kill to rob. Mostly, these latter kind know the man they're robbin' an' don't want no witnesses—or else they're just plain killers at heart. It was one of these here kind that killed Buff."

Tallant was soberly quiet for a few seconds before he answered. "Yeah; I reckon you're right." He shrugged slightly. "Well, what you want me to do with the critter?"

Dugan was shuffling out of the livery barn as he spoke. "Jus' leave him there. I don't allow he'll make it, anyway, from the looks of them holes, so jus' leave him where he can die in peace." He was out of the barn when he finished speaking and he turned toward his office without a backwards look. Les Tallant watched him go thoughtfully, then walked slowly over to the Royal House for his breakfast.

THERE WAS a huge old wooden gate that had the D-Back-To-Back burned deeply into its crossbar where the road swung past and the Vermillion Kid rode through it. His big black horse was ambling along sleepily and the Kid appraised the little bunches of cattle he saw here and there as he followed the well worn ranch road. The beef looked good. Of course there were a few old cows whose bones showed, but they all had big, fat calves by their sides. Mostly, though, the cattle were fat as ticks and placidly contented.

The buildings were old, weather-beaten but well kept up. The house alone

was painted and its veranda ran completely around it, shading the outer walls. An assortment of old, cane-bottomed chairs and a hammock or two, hung in the shade. There was the clear, clarion ringing of a man working at an anvil and the sound, musical and strident, rode down the hot summer air to the Kid as he rode up to a log hitchrail before the house, swung down and tied up.

There was no sign of human activity among the buildings and, except for the unseen smithy, the ranch might have been deserted. The Kid's spurs tinkled softly as he walked across the cool, shadowy veranda and knuckled the door. While he waited, the Kid looked at the grey old pole corrals and the huge log barn, all tight and solid. He felt a glow of appreciation. Here was a Western ranch where you didn't have to strain your innards every time you opened a gate. That was as it should be, but all too seldom—it wasn't the way things were kept, generally speaking. His musings were interrupted and he turned back as the door swung open. The Kid's hat came off and he was standing face to face with a small, full bodied and red eyed woman. Toma Dodge. For an instant she looked up at him blankly, then recognition swept over her face. He could feel the wall of atagonism building up between them.

"Please, Miss Dodge, I'm sorry about yesterday; it won't happen again."

"Is that what you rode all the way out here to say?"

He shook his head. "No ma'm. I heard about your father an' I came out to offer my help in any way you want to use it." He said it exactly as he had rehearsed it. It was better to be diplomatic than to come right out and say he was a lethal killer, and would gladly gun down the murderers of her father. This way she might let him help.

There was a flash of anger through the anguish in her face. She tossed her small, taffy-colored head in that mannerism he remembered so well and the words cut deep. "Thank you, Mister Vermillion Kid, but I think one encounter with renegades, in the past twenty-four hours, has proven disastrous enough for my family. I don't think I want to chance another accident." The way she said "accident" made the Kid squirm inwardly. He stood in silent anger for a long moment, just looking down into the wide violet eyes. Then the anger dropped away and he nodded twice, curtly and softly.

"I knew it was foolish to come out here and offer my services. I knew you'd say something like that." He put his dusty black Stetson on with an unconscious gesture. "Well, Miss Dodge, I hope someday you learn to judge people better."

He turned abruptly and started across the veranda toward his horse. He knew she was watching him, because he didn't hear the door close. A man's gruff voice came to him as he untied the horse, and despite his resolve not to look up, he did anyway.

A blunt-jawed individual was standing next to the wisp of a girl in the doorway, glowering down at him. The Kid flipped his reins, turned his horse a little and had one foot in the stirrup when he heard the man's spurs ringing across the veranda, coming toward him.

He was about to swing aboard when a surly voice spoke behind him. "Don't let me catch you trespassin' on the D-Back-To-Back again, mister."

The Kid's foot slid easily out of the stirrup and he turned slowly. His eyes were level with the angry brown eyes when he spoke, softly. "I don't believe I know you, hombre."

"Jeff Beale, foreman of the D-Back-To-Back. I'm the one who gives the orders hereabouts, hombre, an' I'm tellin' you not to set foot on this here range again."

Normally, the Kid might have over-

looked the man's big talk, but now there were two reasons why he didn't. One, was the girl still standing in the shadowy doorway, and two, was the discomfort and hurt of her words. In short, the Vermillion Kid had absorbed about all the unpleasantness a man could accommodate in so short a space of time. He didn't answer at all, but his gloved fist dropped behind the slope of his shoulder in a flashing fraction of a quick second, then arose with the maulling, bruising weight of his whipcord body behind it. If the foreman saw it coming he made no move to get away; the fist chopped and popped like a bull whip when it connected with his square jaw. Jeff Beale went over backwards like a pole-axed steer.

The Kid swung back toward the girl. "I don't know why, Miss Dodge, but every time I try to talk to you there's trouble." His voice was calm and his smoke grey eyes were mildly puzzled. "I'm sorry about this," he jutted his chin toward the inert form of Beale, "but you're a witness that I didn't start it."

Seeing that the girl was listening and looking at him in silence, he took another plunge. "I wish you'd let me help you. I've been around things like this before an' maybe I could do some good; at any rate, I'd sure like to try."

For the first time since he'd known her, her voice wasn't ringing with pure contempt when she spoke. "And if I agreed, what would your pay be?"

He admired her commonsense and couldn't help but smile a little lopsidedly. "Nothin', ma'm; I don't want your money. Just agree to let me sleep in the bunkhouse an' eat with the other D-Back-To-Back men; that's all."

Her eyes went to the gently stirring form of Jeff Beale. "Help him up and we'll talk about it."

Beale stood on wobbly legs and ran an exploratory hand over his bruised jaw. He was listening to Toma Dodge, but his squinted eyes were on the blank, unsmiling face of the Vermillion Kid, thoughtfully. Finally he nodded. "All right, Toma; if that's what you want we'll try it, but—" The brown eyes were perplexed and Beale shook his head. "Hell, I don't know. I guess we can try him out, anyway."

THE KID rode back to Holbrook, stuffed his scanty gear into his saddle bags, paid his bill at the Royal House and returned to the D-Back-To-Back. When he was putting up his horse, three cowboys sauntered over to the corral and watched him in impassive silence. He nodded and the riders nodded back. The Kid had been a cowboy once and he knew what the men were doing. They were appraising him—evaluating his appearance, his tack and his horse; from these things they would deduce his status among them.

Apparently the silent judgement was favorable because he was gradually included in the men's jokes and hazing until, after two days on the ranch, the Vermillion Kid was more at home than he had been in many years. Jeff Beale introduced him to the men. At the sound of his name, there was a startled, awkward silence that, strangely enough, Beale himself filled in with casual talk until the riders got over their furtive stares and sudden silence.

For two days the Kid worked the cattle with the men. He saw neither Toma Dodge or Beale, except in the early morning when the foreman would line out the work. The Kid was anxious to work on the murder and, the evening of the third day, he went up to the house. Toma admitted him to a huge old parlor with a roaring fire in a massive, smoked over old stone fireplace. He recognized the ancient trappings of the old frontier on the walls. Indian trophies hung droopily among old tintype pictures and the comfortable old leather furniture was typical of an earlier day on the frontier. The Kid held his hat self-consciously in his hand and turned it by the brim in slow,

nervous convolutions as he spoke. "Miss Dodge, it sort of seems to me like we're wastin' a lot of good time."

The girl nodded, her eyes on the colorful Navaho rugs. "I know; it seems like that to me, too; but Jeff is nosing around in Holbrook and doesn't want you to do anything until he's chased down some ideas he has about Dad's murder."

The Kid frowned. His answer was dryly matter of fact. "Well, while Beale's lookin' around, a lot of water can pass under the bridge."

The beautiful eyes came up with a decisive upsweep of the head. "I know it, Kid; you can start out on your own tomorrow, only—"

"Only, what?"

"Only don't let Jeff know what you're doing. He'll be angry if he knows I let you start your investigation."

The Kid's eyebrows came together over his steady grey eyes. "Miss Dodge, this here's likely to be a long drawn-out an' dangerous little chore. Don't you think we ought to all start out by trustin' each other?"

"What do you mean?" Her face colored a little.

"Well, if Beale doesn't know what I'm up to, it'll make a lot of unnecessary hard feelings, won't it?"

Toma Dodge stood up and looked at the fireplace. The Kid felt a sudden little tug at his heart-strings as he studied her retroussee profile. She was so small and helpless looking, yet so much a woman, the kind of a woman a man needed. "I don't know what to say."

The Kid guessed, correctly, that her father's sudden demise had projected her into a role of responsibility that was altogether foreign, and a little frightening, to her. He got up and went over beside her, his hat gripped tightly in his hands. There was a half wistful, half truculent look on his face.

"All right, Miss Dodge. I'll keep out of Beale's way. We'll do it your way, but, frankly, I don't think it's too good an idea."

She turned toward him. For a wild second her eyes locked with his and a strong electric current passed between them. The Kid turned away in confusion and, mumbling excuses, left the house. Outside, the stars were clear and brittle. He rolled and smoked a cigaret in the warm, velvety shadows of the corrals. He didn't think it would ever happen, but it had; he was in love.

AT DAYBREAK, the Vermillion Kid had saddled up and ridden out of the D-Back-To-Back ranch yard. The air was cool without being cold and the land was lazily stirring to life. Here and there a hustling rabbit was out searching for dew drenched young shoots and garrulous, sleepy birds made slight noises at his passing. Holbrook was just coming to life when the Kid rode in. He left his horse at the livery stable. The bleary-eyed hostler smiled at him through a foul fog of sickening breath. "Sure nice to see you again."

The Kid raised his eyebrows. He had forgotten tipping the man so lavishly; besides, his mind was on a small, oval face with violet eyes. He smiled vacantly, said nothing, and walked slowly out of the barn. He was almost to the street when the hostler came weaving up to him. "Say, I was wonderin' if you'd he'p me move a horse?"

"Move one? Hell, can't you lead him?"

"No; y'see, this here critter's dyin' from a bullet wound an' he's down."

The Kid understood. The animal was down, weak and dying, and the hostler wanted to turn him over so his body weight would be on the off legs for awhile; just in case he ever got up again, the legs wouldn't be too numb to operate. He walked back, helped the hostler turn the horse, straightened up and was dusting off his hands when he saw the hip brand. D-Back-To-Back.

"Where'd you get this horse?"

"He come staggerin' in here the night Dodge was killed. 'Twas his horse, so the sheriff says."

The Kid studied the bullet holes with compressed lips, then walked from the barn. He went to the Royal House and had an early breakfast. The dining room was vacant and he ate slowly, turning Dodge's murder over in his mind.

The day was well along and the Kid had decided to have a talk with Sheriff Dugan. He was approaching the sheriff's office when he saw Dugan and Jeff Beale standing in the shade of the portico, watching him come forward. The Kid felt an uneasy suspicion at the silent, intent way they watched him approach, but shook it off. He was almost in front of the two men when his wary eye, trained from youth to be alert, caught the slight drop of Beale's right shoulder. The Kid halted, legs apart, surprised but not unprepared.

There was a long, tense silence, then Emmett Dugan, still motionless, spoke: "Don't go for it, Kid."

"No? Why not?"

" 'Cause I want to talk to you, an' a killin' won't help you any, right now."

"All right, Sheriff; tell Beale to shove his hands deep in his pockets."

Dugan turned to the D-Back-To-Back foreman. "Do like he says, Jeff." Beale hesitated, still staring wide eyed at the Kid. "Come on, Jeff; gunplay won't settle nothin'—not yet, anyway." Beale shoved his balled-up fists reluctantly into his pockets and the Kid approached, warily, until he was even with the two men. Dugan jerked a thumb toward his office but the Kid slowly shook his head.

"Let's do our talkin' right here, Sheriff. I sort of like the fresh air, this mornin'."

Dugan regarded the gunman for a long, doleful moment, then shrugged. "Kid, where was you the night Dodge got killed?"

"Early in the evenin' I was at the *First Chance;* later I went to bed in my room at the Royal House."

"Got any proof that you were abed?"

The Kid snorted. "Hardly, Sheriff; I make it a habit to sleep alone."

Dugan and Beale exchanged a significant glance, which the Kid saw. He puckered up his eyebrows and looked from one to the other. "Just what in hell have you two hombres got on your minds?"

Dugan spoke slowly, in a measured voice devoid of inflections, as if he was reciting a story. "Dodge was killed an' robbed; we got reason to suspect you done it. If you got proof you didn't, then we gotta hunt further afield. But if you ain't got proof, then I'm goin' to hold you for awhile."

The Kid's right shoulder sagged perceptibly and his eyes narrowed. He shook his head slowly. "No, Sheriff, I didn't kill or rob Dodge, an' you're not goin' to hold me, either." His voice was soft, almost gentle, and Hart looked at Dugan accusingly, hands still rammed into his pants pockets.

Dugan shifted his weight a little and frowned. "If you're innocent Kid, you got nothin' to worry about. Better give me your gun."

"No good, Sheriff. I don't know what kind of a deal is cooked up here, but I'm not goin' to walk into a noose to help it along."

There was a long moment of silence as Dugan's flinty eyes washed over the Kid. He knew the Kid's reputation with a gun, but Emmett Dugan had a job and a duty to perform; and his complete lack of imagination saw only the course he must pursue. He shook his head slowly and his face set in hard, uncompromising lines. "I'm warnin' you, Kid, you got no choice."

"You're wrong, Sheriff," the voice was very gentle now; "I got a pretty good choice."

Dugan almost sighed. The Kid saw his eyes widen a fraction of an inch. That was all he needed. Two explosions rocked the still, lazy atmosphere

of Holbrook. There was a second of awful suspense, then twice more the coughing roar of a .45 blasted the silence. Dugan was cursing in a low, deadly monotone and sagged against the front of his office holding a scarlet rag of torn shirt over his ribs and Jeff Beale out-gunned from scratch, was writhing in the dust of the roadway, a bullet throught the hip. The Vermillion Kid was untouched and crouched low with his lips pressed back flat over his teeth.

Holbrook's citizens were prudent folk. They loved to revel in the recounting of gun fights; but they reasoned, logically enough, that in order to pass on the stories, it was a necessary requisite that one stay alive. In order to accomplish this, they stayed out of sight until the fight was over. Thus it was that the Vermillion Kid strolled away from the scene of carnage, retrieved his horse from the suddenly sobered hostler at the livery barn, and rode easily out of town in a long, mile-eating lope.

THE KID sat on a juniper-studded knoll and overlooked the D-Back-To-Back ranch house that night. The watery, faint light of the clear, cold stars and the weak moon, made shaddows of the coming and going riders below. He knew that Toma Dodge had heard, by now, of his shooting scrape. He wondered what she thought of him, in light of his recent blunder. The Kid thoughtfully chewed a straw as the night hours drifted by; finally, when the last lights had died out over the ranch, he carefully removed his spurs and made a cautious, laborious descent to the gloomy buildings of the ranch. The Kid got to the house without much trouble. The riders were sawing wood after the day's excitement. The Kid forced a window with determined effort, slid through the opening, only to feel the cold, menancing barrel of a sixgun in his belly. He exhaled slowly and tried to pierce the gloom.

"Don't move." It was Toma's voice. The Kid froze but felt a surge of relief at the same time. At any rate, it wasn't Dugan or Beale.

"Miss Dodge—"

"Be quiet; I should've known better than to trust you. I—"

"Doggone it, hold on a minute, will you. I didn't have a chance—"

The voice of the girl was as firm as the gun-barrel. "No; of course you didn't. Oh, what a fool I was to believe in you. Jeff Beale suspected you from the start and, when he found the bullet in Dad's horse, he and Sheriff Dugan stole one of your bullets and they matched. I ought to kill you right now. You're nothing but a cold blooded murderer."

All the time she was talking the Kid was trying to piece something together. He listened to her angry voice drone into the darkness without hearing much of what she said, then it came to him in a flash. He started to move and the gun barrel, momenatrily forgotten, pressed deeper. He pulled backwards instinctively and interrupted the flood of vituperation.

"Wait a minute, will you? Hold it a second." Her voice died away gradually, begrudgingly, and the Kid tried to see the violet eyes but couldn't. "Did you say Beale found a bullet in your Paw's horse?"

"Yes. He dug it out this afternoon; after you shot him." Her voice held a full measure of sarcastic triumph in it. "He wasn't so badly shot up that Doc Carter didn't patch him up enough to go on digging up facts to hang you with."

The Kid's funnybone had been rubbed. He nodded soberly, lugubriously. "Yeah, I'm sure of it ma'am; especially since I didn't shoot to kill—but just hold off pullin' that trigger for one second, will you?"

"Well?"

"Look, Toma—"

"Miss Dodge!"

"Uh, yeah, Toma—uh, Miss Dodge,

honey. Your Dad's horse was shot through the chest, sort of between the shoulders an' the chest. The bullet went in on the left side, there's a hole to show where it entered, an' on the right side there's a hole to show where it come out. Now listen, Toma—"

"Miss Dodge!"

"Uh, yeah, Toma; now listen. How in, uh, heck, could Beale dig the bullet out of your Paw's horse, when the slug went in one side an' come out the other side? In other words, ma'am, there couldn't have been any slug in that there critter to dig out."

THE GIRL was silent and the Kid felt the pressure on the gun-barrel lessen slightly. She was silent so long that the Kid felt uneasy. "You didn't happen to see the horse, did you?"

"No."

"Was Sheriff Dugan here, this evenin'?"

"Yes."

"Was he after me for the killin' of your Paw?"

"Yes."

"Look Toma," there was a pointed pause but she didn't take it up, "do me a favor will you?"

"What?"

"Go to Holbrook tomorrow mornin' an' look at that there horse."

"Yes; I intend to—but not as a favor to you." But the gun-barrel had dropped quite a bit and the Kid wanted to smile at her.

"Well, then, can I go now?"

"Why did you come here, tonight?"

"To talk to you; to tell you how I was forced to make that gunplay or get locked up, an' I don't want to get locked up just yet. I've got a couple of ideas I want to try out. Can I go now?"

The gun was at her side now, dangling from a white, small hand. Out of place and slightly ridiculous. She tried to see his eyes in the darkness. "You haven't discovered anything, then?"

The Kid gingerly let one leg out of the window as he answered. "Yes ma'm; I discovered one thing. 'Course it's got no bearin' that I can see on the murder, but still, it's awful important to me."

"What is it?"

"That I'm in love with you."

He was gone over the windowsill before she could recover from the surprise and shock. The faint rustle of his bootheels in the geranium bed softly blended into the night and Toma Dodge sank into a rocker and let the gun drop to the floor. She let her wan, worried face follow the shadowy figure that faded into the gloom as the Vermillion Kid fled through the night, back to his patiently-grazing big black horse on the little knoll.

The Kid was in his element now and there were few better at it. He was on the dodge. There were handbills tacked to the trees along the Holbrook road and on the fronts of buildings in town. He hid with the almost nonchalant casualness of an old hand on the owlhoot trail. Once he even slipped into Holbrook. He flattened against the walls of the livery barn and buttonholed the startled hostler.

"Listen pardner, I want you to tell me somethin'."

The hostler recognized him and relaxed a little. He hadn't forgotten that twenty dollar gold piece. "Sure, Kid; what is it?"

"Was Beale alone when he dug a slug out of Dodge's horse?"

"Well, I don't know what he done to the horse, cause they sent me away—"

"Who were 'they'?"

"Oh, Les Tallant—the hombre who owns this here barn—an' Jeff Beale. They was messin' aroun' that wounded horse an', when I come up, Tallant told me to beat it. I don't know what they done to the poor critter after I left."

"How is the horse?"

"S'funny thing, by golly, but the

dang critter got up all by hisself, today. 'Pears to be gettin' better."

"One more thing, pardner. Were Tallant an' Dodge friends?"

The hostler shrugged a little. "No; I wouldn't call 'em exactly friends. Y'see, Tallant's hell to gamble an', near as I can figger out, Old Man Dodge set him up in this here livery barn with a big loan. Les' been gamblin' pretty heavy an' once I heard 'em cussin' at each other in the office. 'Course I wasn't eavesdroppin' y'understand—"

"'Course not; I understand." If there was a tinge of amused sarcasm in the Kid's voice, the hostler didn't get it.

"Anyway, like I was sayin', they's was hollerin' at one another an' Dodge tol' Les if he didn't keep his word on the note, they'd have some trouble."

"How long was that before Dodge got killed?"

"Oh, hell; I don't rightly know. Six months maybe; maybe eight months." The old cowboy screwed up his face. "Say; you don't think Les Tallant killed the old man, do ya? Hell, from what I heard aroun' town, they was more'n one man in at the shootin'."

The Kid reached into his pocket and shrugged at the same time. He passed the hostler a gold piece and watched the avaricious glitter come into the whiskey rheumed eyes. "No. I don't allow Tallant did the killin' by himself. *Quien sabe?* Who knows who did it, or how many there were?" He thanked the hostler and ducked back out of town.

THE KID had the thing pretty well worked out in his mind before he moved out of his lair among the juniper hills. It wasn't exactly clear to him, yet, what it was all about; but somehow he felt that he'd stumbled onto a short cut to the killers. He leisurely saddled up the big black. Hummed to himself in the late afternoon, checked his gun and belt loops, swung aboard and rode carefully out over the moonlit range. The night was balmy; like there might be summer rain in the offing, and the full, mellow light of the heavens covered the land with its mantle of eerie, soft and mysterious light.

The Kid rode for several hours before he came to the knoll where he'd watched the D-Back-To-Back ranch yard the day of his gunfight with Dugan and Beale. Like a ghostly silhouette, the Kid sat in a pensive mood, overlooking the ranch below. The buildings were dark. The Kid dismounted, shucked his spurs, hobbled his horse and began the descent to the ranch yard below. He knew the way, this time, and, by the time the back of the house loomed up before him, he had taken only a fraction of the time he had used on his first abortive visit to Toma Dadge.

The Kid tried the window, found it not only unlocked, but easier to slide up than it had been before. A tiny tinkling of warning rang far back in the dim recesses of his mind but he shrugged them away. He was inside the room, flattened against the wall, hand hovering over his .45, listening, when the little warning buzzed again. This time, concentrating on the darkness as he was, the warning was limned sharply in his mind. He stood motionless and listened. Somewhere in the house he could hear voices. Men's voices. A full awareness of his position swept over him in an instant and he hesitated briefly, looking wonderingly at the opened window. The voices came again, dim and distant and incomprehensible, but unmistakable. He turned his back on the route of escape and began a sidling, stealthy advance across the room.

The Kid's eyes were accustomed to the gloom by the time he had been in the Dodge house for ten minutes. Still, he felt his way along the wall, careful not to bump into anything. He found a long, cool corridor and went down it. The voices were clearer now and suddenly he heard the voices of Toma

Dodge. The words weren't hard to understand and they sent a chill over the Kid.

"No. You're both wrong; he told me about the two bullet holes, but I saw them for myself."

A masculine voice interrupted. "I told you we should've finished off the damned horse."

Another voice, garrulous and sullen, answered. "All right; I was wrong. As soon as she signs the deed, we'll go back an' kill the damn' critter."

The first voice answered swiftly and there was the sound of a man rising fr[illegible] his chair. "Come on Toma; we ain't got all night. Sign it an' nothin' ll happen to you."

"And if I don't?"

There was a unpleasant silence that the Kid felt and understood. He let his hand rest caressingly on his gun but.

"An' if you don't, you'll get what your Ol' Man got."

"You'd do that to a woman?" Her voice was high and incredulous.

Apparently the man nodded because Toma's voice came again, softly, as though a dismal apathy had swept over her. "You'll never be able to get away with it."

"Let us worry about that, Toma. You jus' sigh the deed."

The Vermillion Kid was as tense as a coiled spring. He was prepared to go into violent action on an instant's notice. There was a long silence from the other room, then the Kid relaxed and turned away as he heard one of the men sigh and speak: "That's more like it Toma; now you're as safe as can be."

The Kid was lowering himself out of the window when Toma answered, but he couldn't hear her reply. "You're not, though, Jeff Beale. You've made the greatest mistake of your life."

THE KID ran in a crouched, zigzag course back to his waiting horse. He slipped off the hobbles after pulling on the split-ear bridle, mounted in a flying leap of frantic hoofbeats and rode down the night like a wraith of doom, thundering along the trackless range, a faint, ghostly figure bent on an act of justice that would thwart, if timely enough, the evil plans of two ruthless murderers.

Holbrook was noisy in a desultory sort of way. It was a week day night and the revellers that inundated the town on Saturday night were mostly asleep in the bunkhouses across the cattle country. Even so, however, there was enough noise to drown out the thundering approach of hoofbeats. The raucous screach of a protesting piano, accompanied by a nasal tenor, frequently drowned out by the laughter, shouts and curses of the saloon clientele, ignored the narrow eyed rider who swung down inside Tallant's livery barn, tense and with probing, hard eyes of smoke grey.

Disturbed in his secret libations, the bleary-eyed hostler came grumblingly out of a dark stall where a mound of unclean hay served as couch, bed and bar. Looking up when he was close enough to discern the night traveler, the hostler gave a small start and shook his head. "Too late, pardner, too late."

The Kid stepped forward. "What d'ya mean, too late?"

"Jus' what I said. Sheriff Dugan's got a warrant out for you. Dead or alive. You're a goner."

The Kid appraised the man. He wondered if the man was too drunk to trust. "Pardner, just how drunk are you, anyway?"

The hostler's face got a sullen smear of color in its cheeks and his eyes were surly. "Not so drunk that I don't know a thing or two, why?"

The Kid jumped in whole hog. He had no other choice. "Because, pardner, a man's life depends on you tonight."

"That so? Whose?"

"Mine, amigo; mine."

The hostler looked owlishly at the Kid and a stray strand of his old time decency flared up in a quick, final ef-

fort to assert itself. The man's voice was suddenly very steady and sincere and his jaw shot out a little. "All right pardner; start at the beginnin'."

"Tallant an' Jeff Beale are on their way here to kill Dodge's horse, tonight."

The hostler made a forlorn little clucking sound in his throat. "An' the poor critter's on the mend, too; damned if I don't believe he's goin' to pull through after all."

The Kid let the interruption run it's course. "Listen pardner, I want you to hide my horse in one of those back stalls. Don't unsaddle or unbridle him. Jus' close the door to the stall and fork him in a little hay so's he'll be quiet."

"That all?"

"No. I want you to take a note over to Sheriff Dugan an' then stay out of the barn until he shootin's over. Understand?"

"I reckon. Where's the note?"

"Take care of my horse an' I'll write it."

The hostler nodded, took the Kid's reins and led the black horse off into the dark recesses of the old barn. The Kid tore a handbill of himself off the barn wall, scrabbled a stubby pencil out of a shirt pocket and wrote frowningly until the sot returned. He folded the coarse paper and handed it to his accomplice. "Pardner, here's where you've got the whip hand. If you doublecross me an' hand that there paper to Tallant, Beale—or anyone besides the sheriff—I'm done for."

The old cowboy pulled himself up in his filthy rags and his watery brown eyes were stern. "I'm a lot of things, comita, but a bushwhacker ain't one of 'em."

The Kid nodded softly. "I believe you, pardner. On your way."

THE HOSTLER had disappeared down the plank sidewalk and the Kid had hidden himself behind some loose planks in the gloom of the building, before the sound of horses came over the sound of revelry, to him. He watched, motionless, as Beale and Tallant swung down, tied their horses in tie stalls, loosened their cinchas and looked at one another.

Beale spoke first. "Went off like clockwork."

"Yeah. All we got to do is make two more killings. Blast the damned horse, then go back an get the girl, an' the whole shootin' match is ours."

Tallant nodded. "Yeah. It come off better'n I expected. Two more killin's an' the whole country'll be after the Vermillion Kid with orders from Dugan to shoot on sight. Hell, that dang would-be owlhooter'll never get close enough to anybody to convince 'em he ain't guilty."

"Yeah, but what about the horse?"

Tallant rubbed his hands together. "That's the easiest part. We kill him, drag him off out on the range behind town, an' the coyotes'll have him torn to pieces in twenty-four hours. Nobody'll ever see them two holes again."

Beale swore gruffly. "Yeah. But if it hadn't been for that damned Kid nobody'd ever of noticed there was two holes to start with."

Tallant laughed smoothly. Don't make no difference now. Come on; let's go in the office an' have a drink afore we finish off the horse."

Beale nodded heavily. "Sure; we'll be ridin' again, back to the D-Back-To-Back for Toma before this night's work is done, so I reckon we'll need the lift, eh?"

Tallant didn't answer and the Kid could barely make out his outline and hear the soft music of his spurs as the two men went into the cubby hole office, lit a lamp that cast a rich, yellowish light, and drank deeply from a brown bottle Tallant got out of the safe.

The Kid's fury was murderously cold. That Beale and Tallant intended to shoot down Toma Dodge was almost overpowering him.

Jeff Beale came out of the office first. He hesitated at the door, waiting for Tallant to lock up the whiskey bottle in the safe again. Tallant's garrulous voice came to him: "If I don't lock up the whiskey in the safe, that damned boozehound I got for a hostler'll steal it all." Beale didn't answer. He was studying the mellow moonlight inside the barn. He finally got impatient.

"Come on, dammit." Tallant slammed the safe door, spun the dail and hurried out of the ofice. The two men walked down the long, wide corridor toward the stall of the wounded horse. Tallant walked with the sure steps of a man to whom the darkness imposed no deterrent. but Beale swore dourly to himself and made slower time. Tallant stopped at a stall directly across from the Kid's hideout and waited for Beale to come up.

"He's in here."

"If you shoot him it'll make too much noise."

"Ain't goin' to shoot him; goin' to knock him over the poll with my gunbarrel."

TALLANT swung open the door as Beale came up. "Lead him out here in the alley. He'll be too hard to snake out'n the stall when he's dead."

"Right." Tallant put a shank to the horse's halter and led the weak, stumbling animal through the doorway. Beale swore savagely at the animal's slow progress and kicked out viciously, striking the horse in the stomach. The animal flinched and grunted with pain. The Kid's eyes flamed in the darkness. Tallant turned the big bay so that he faced the rear door of the barn, drew his gun, tossed a quick look at Beale, who nodded indifferently, his evil face twisted into a cruel grin of anticipation, then all hell broke loose.

There was a thunderous, magnified echo from inside the barn and Tallant's sixgun went flipping out of his hand as though plucked from his startled fingers by an invisible hand. The bay horse jumped frantically and lurched out of the barn's rear doorway. Beale ripped out an obscene oath and threw himself sideways to the ground. Les Tallant stood for a full ten seconds, incredulous and unbelieving, then he leaned quickly backwards, into the recently vacated stall and ran his hand, like the striking tongue of a rattler, under his coat and came up with a big bore little derringer.

Jeff Beale had seen the mushroom of flame from the Kid's gun and fired as soon as he hit the ground, then rolled away, waiting for the answering shot that never came. Beale's breathing sounded as loud as the puffing of a locomotive in his own ears. He strained his eyes into the gloom for a target, saw none, listened acutely, heard nothing, threw two more snap shots toward where the flame had been, and waited. Still nothing happened. He began to hope that his first shot had found the hidden gunman, and, as the seconds ticked by, he felt certain that the hidden assassin had been knocked off with his first shot.

"Les?"

For a long moment Tallant didn't answer, then, seeing that no exploratory shots came toward Beale's voice, he answered: "Yes?"

"'Think I got him with the first shot?"

Another pause, then Tallant's voice, cautious and soft, came back: "Who is it?"

Beale's voice was almost normal now. He was certain the unseen gunman had been killed outright. "Hell, how should I know? I can't see in the dark like no damned cat."

Tallant made out the rising form of his pardner, coming erect off the floor of the barn. "Be careful, Jeff. He might be playin' possum."

"I'll damned soon find out."

Walking slowly forward, Jeff Beale was crouched almost double, his gun

held out in front of himself, when the second shot came out of the darkness. Tallant saw the flash and heard the roar out of the corner of his eye even as he fired and saw Beale go down in a cursing heap. He fired again and again, then suddenly the little derringer was empty. The acrid smell of gunsmoke was thick of the air and some of the stalled horses were snorting wildly in fear.

Tallant was panicky. He was unarmed, now, and Beale was hit. A thought flashed across his mind and he darted toward the fallen man, jerked the .45 from his fingers, ran zigzag through the barn toward the tie stalls and his snorting, wild eyed horse as Jeff Beale called after him. Once, Tallant whirled, aimed carefully, and pulled the trigger. Beale abruptly stopped his swearing, jerked spasmodically against the violence of his suddenly short-circuited nervous system, and went limp, twitching dully over the freshly raked, hard packed earth of the livery barn floor.

Seeing Tallant on the verge of escape, the Vermillion Kid leaped stiffly from his hiding place, ran to the middle of the alleyway, unmindful of the clear outline of the moonlight behind him that silhouetted him into a perfect target. "Don't move, Tallant; get away from that horse's head."

Tallant was obsessed with an insane urge to flee. He was beyond reason. He whirled, threw up his gun and fired. The Kid staggered backwards, went down to one knee and his head drooped. Only one thing made it possible for him to force his mind and muscles to work; the certain knowledge that Tallant was on his way to kill Toma Dodge.

He brought up his right arm. The gun weighed a hundred pounds. Its barrel weaved unsteadily an, as the Kid squeezed the trigger, he saw a vague, shapeless figure leap out of the shadows and attach itself to the bridle of the horse that Tallant had just swung upon. He saw too, the quick, descending arc as Tallant's gun came down, and the orange tongue of flame when he fired. The ragged figure fell soddenly to earth. The Kid squeezed the trigger and saw Tallant straighten in the saddle. The blasting roar of another gunshot split the night and the Kid sank down.

WHEN THE Vermillion Kid opened his eyes he was looking into the hard, relentless face of Sheriff Dugan. His eyes wandered from Dugan's flinty features to the surrounding walls and ceiling. He had never been in the sheriff's office before, but he knew he was lying on a makeshift cot behind Dugan's untidy desk. He swung his eyes back to Dugan. "You got the note?" Dugan nodded dumbly. "Where's the bay horse? Seems a shame that a horse as gutty as he is damned near got killed."

Dugan's eyes clouded for just an instant, then the film of hardness settled into place once more. "He's goin' to be all right. Some of the D-Back-To-Back riders led him out to the ranch. The old boy's lookin' a little better all the time. He's goin' to make it all right." The sheriff's voice drifted off and faded out altogether.

The Kid nodded slightly. "What happened after I took my siesta?"

"Nothin" much. Tallant was fixin' to ride out when old Bob, the hostler, jumped him an' tried to pull him off his horse. He shot the old boy dead."

There was an awkward moment of silence as each man, in his own way, said a rough, embarrassed prayer for the drunkard. Dugan cleared his throat loudly. "After I got your note about Tallant an' Beale wantin' to kill the horse, I loped down there an' got there just as Bob made his play. I could dimly see you kneelin' in the back o' the barn, near Beale's body. Les Tallant threw down on me an' I shot him

out o' the saddle. That's all there was to it."

The Kid's eyes strayed around the room again and came up suddenly, wide and incredulous. Toma Dodge was sitting, small and fragile, white faced and big eyed, near Dugan's desk. The Kid swallowed a couple of times quickly and felt the blood rushing into his face. Dugan cast a quick, furtive look at the two of them, arose, coughed, and ambled shufflingly toward the door. When he was at the opening he turned slowly.

"Take it easy, Kid; you got a bad notch in the side. Three inches more to the left and you'd of been makin' the long march with Beale." He let his eyes wander aimlessly to Toma, small and slightly flushed, in the old cane backed chair. "Sort'a look after him for a spell, will you, Toma? I got to go, uh, uptown for a few minutes." Dugan closed the door softly behind himself and strolled slowly down the roadway toward the silent, gloomy maw of the livery barn.

"Miss Dodge, I—"

"Toma."

"Uh, yeah: Toma, I reckon we figured this thing out pretty well, at that, didn't we?"

"Yes." Her lips quivered for a moment and the reserve melted away. "Oh, Kid I'm so sorry I misjudged you." She left the chair and went up closer to the improvised cot. The Kid smiled up at her and the faint little wistful smile tugged at the corners of his mouth.

"To a man from a cesspool, the gutter is Heaven," he quoted, softly.

There were misty tears in her violet eyes. She bent down swiftly and her warm, moist lips clung to his for a tremulous moment, then she arose and turned away. He recovered from his startled attitude as she reached the door.

"Toma?"

"Yes?"

"Did you do that because I'm hurt an' you feel sorry for me?"

"No."

His head came off the pallet. "Then I'll be ridin' out to the D-Back-To-Back in a day or two."

She went through the door with a high blush on her face, but there was also a demure flash of affection in her eyes and the answer came back softly to the Kid. "I'll be waiting for you."

★

Ned Shuster was a bust as a basketball player for the Bushwhackers, but the question was whether he was being paid for losing. And when he disappeared, then turned up dead, the list of plausible suspects was a long one...anyone who knew him!

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Pete Mantel was a genial rustler, and he had a bit of advice for Joe Olds and the other small ranchers he victimized. Very simple: just raise something that isn't worth rustling!

IT WAS the pure, ornery courage of the spotted razorback boar that caused Joe Olds to lower his rifle. He had hazed the beast up the blind draw there on the edge of the Texas badlands. But with its long-ridged back to the wall, the animal turned its short-sighted attention toward the crowding horse, grunting a confident challenge. There was no mistaking the length of the boar's threatening tusks; it was a legendary range character in these parts.

"I might have known it was you, Old Grunter," Olds murmured. He let his nervous pony put distance between itself and the hog before returning his rifle to the boot. "If there's one thing I like, it's a fighter. Buck DeLancey can do his own dirty work."

Something about the words he had just uttered startled Olds. He pulled the pony up short, forgetting all about Old Grunter. The razorback, no longer worried by the horse, trotted disdainfully into the brush. Absently, Olds watched the hog disappear. Finally the cowhand placed where he had heard similar words before. They had been spoken rather sharply by Miss Eulalia George, the homesteader's daughter, the last time Olds had visited there.

"If there's one thing I like, it's a fighter. Let Buck DeLancey do his own dirty work," the young lady informed him. Then she went into the cabin in a huff.

"That girl won't rest until she's got me saddled down with a spread of my own," Olds told his mount. "But, dang me, wouldn't she be some put out if she ever learns it had to be a hog that convinced me!"

When Olds rode up to Luke George's cabin later, he was surprised to see DeLancey's favorite buckskin reined outside. The Lazy D boss ducked through the door as Olds dismounted.

"You get that boar?" DeLancey demanded.

"Plumb disappeared."

"Keep looking for it. That varmint's liable to kill somebody; almost gored my horse yesterday."

Olds said nothing, but that wasn't the way he'd heard it from the boys who'd been with the cowman. Old Grunter caught DeLancey off in the rangeland brush afoot and chased him right back into noon camp.

"That Lazy D Beef?"

"Yep." Olds lifted it off his pony. "I dropped that proddy old mossyhorn we've been after. Figure since I was over this way, the Georges would appreciate me bringing my supper."

There was no humor in the man. DeLancey said, "Eulalia didn't mention you'd been invited."

At that moment, the young lady herself marched from the cabin, blonde hair shining in the clear prairie dusk. Sweetly, without looking at Olds, she told DeLancey, "Everyone's welcome at our table. Even your hireling." She took the ranch owner's arm and led him inside.

Joe had a lot of respect for Old Grunter . . .

RANKLED, Olds stood there holding the beef. He recovered and hastily carried it inside. Eulalia had retired to one corner of the large cabin and was brightly chattering to the entranced rancher. Luke George and his three equally brawny, equally silent sons lounged around the remainder of the room. They regarded Olds and his beef with interest. "Welcome," George drawled. "Welcome," his sons chorused.

"Sure—sure," Olds replied. Mrs. George, busy with supper at the big stove, smiled at Olds. "Never you mind, son; put that beef here."

Rid of the beef, Olds deposited his sixshooter on the George gun table. "Sit a spell," invited Luke. Olds considered Eulalia and her animated conversation with DeLancey, then reluctantly took his silent position among the homesteaders. At this, the three George boys grinned at him, looked in unison across the room at Eulalia and the cowman, then grinned back at Olds.

Olds slammed the palms of his hands

against his dusty britches and got up. He clumped across the room. DeLancey his head close to Eulalia's, lifted it angrily. Olds ignored him. "Eulalia, I want words with you."

Eulalia gazed at him, blue eyes wide. Olds took firm hold on her arm. He was fully aware of the interested gazes of George, his three sons, DeLancey, and even Mrs. George—so arrested by the scene she stopped her work to watch. Olds walked Eulalia right on out of the cabin.

"Well!" Eulalia said, looking up at him demurely. Her piquant features seemed to glow in the darkness.

"Now," Olds said. "When did the boss start coming out here?"

"He stopped by looking for strays." Eulalia made pushing gestures at her hair. He's been by several times since."

"Look here," Olds said. "You don't want a ranch that bad, do you?"

"What do you mean?" she asked archly.

"You wouldn't marry DeLancey for his spread."

"He's got the biggest one around, hasn't he?"

"You wait," Olds said; "I'll have one of my own."

"A girl gets old waiting."

"Well, all right, I'll show you, dang it!" He stormed into the cabin and told the startled DeLancey, "I quit. From here on, you can do your own dirty work."

DeLancey rose, puzzled, a solid shape. "You're a good top hand, drawing top wages. What's in your craw, Olds?"

"I'm starting my own spread on that grass next to Badlands Springs."

DeLancey frowned, then uttered a short laugh. "Pete Mantel and his boys will rustle you blind. Better think it over real good. There's too many small ranches going broke on this range now."

"Mantel and his *bandidos* don't scare me," Olds said.

DeLancey's head thrust forward. The fluttering lamplight threw dark shadows across his face. "Maybe you don't have to be scared."

"Meaning what?"

"How often have you taken your supper off Lazy D beef?"

Olds took a slow step toward the rancher. Luke George's words lashed across the room. "That'll be enough of such talk!"

DeLancey's head lifted sharply toward George, light striking his commanding features. Eulalia was suddenly at his side, murmuring something. DeLancey's attention turned to her, softening his expression.

A lost feeling touched at Olds. He nodded to George. "My apologies; I reckon I'd better mosey along. I'll sample your cooking another time, ma'am," he spoke to Mrs. George, "when it ain't so crowded around your table."

IN ORDER to get his dugout started against the hill overlooking Badlands Springs, Olds had to run Old Grunter off. The boar had established a dust wallow in that location and proved a tough customer to dispossess. First, Olds hazed him out of the way with his pony. Before he could get to work, the animal was back. Olds dropped a loop over the razorback's huge head; but when it became a question of whether the pony was dragging the boar or the boar was chasing the quivering, sweating horse, Olds had to sacrifice his reata. He was hardly back at the hill when here came Old Grunter trotting out of the brush, still dragging the rawhide.

"Proud as a peacock, aren't you, old son?" Olds said. "Maybe this will get the message across." Lifting his six-shooter, he took careful aim at the boar's shield, where the sideskin and the gristle of the beast formed a protective armor, and fired. The bullet creased the shield. Old Grunter let out a challenging squeal and launched a menacing run right for Olds. Olds

fired another deflecting shot which whined off one tusk of the razorback. The hog sidestepped off, lowered his long snout as if to consider the situation, then grunted and slowly trotted away.

"Oh, I know you'll be around," Olds said, grinning. "But maybe you'll be a little politer hereafter."

Olds started digging into the slope with his spade, planning to make the hill serve as back and side walls of his quarters. He hadn't been working long before he heard the thud of hooves. DeLancey and a crew of Lazy D hands pulled up their horses.

"We heard shots from this direction," the cattle boss said. "Thought we'd better check."

"Right neighborly," Olds commented.

DeLancey leaned forward, hands on his saddle horn. "You know I could clear you out of here; there's Lazy D brand all over this range."

Olds grinned. "You could. But I'd take you with me."

DeLancey lifted his reins; his voice ran thin. "You always did talk tough, friend. I'll leave it up to Pete Mantel to clean you out. Come on, boys."

Quarters established in the hillside, Olds located a nearby blind canyon and turned it into a corral. He hazed a small herd of wild mustangs into it, trapping them where he could start breaking better ponies for his own string and, later, sale in Prairie Town, a hundred miles away.

As the basis for his herd, Olds found it easy to obtain the young cows and bulls he needed from the smaller ranchers, backed up against the badlands by the far flung open range claims of the Lazy D and beset by Mantel's rustling. His stock driven onto the grass he had claimed, Olds turned his pony toward the George homestead for the first time in a month.

"The J Bar O is in business," he told the collective family.

Eulalia seized his arm, smiling up at him. "Now it wasn't so hard to stride out for yourself, was it?"

"Nothing to it," Olds told her happily.

"Where do you plan to locate the ranch house?"

Luke George shook his head. "Here the boy just gets started, and you want a ranch house planned!"

"There's sure a lot of mossyhorns to run out of the badlands before I'll be able to brand enough calves for a ranch house," Olds admitted.

"You've got a ranch, haven't you?" Eulalia demanded with a toss of her blonde hair. "Then you'll have a ranch house. I'll come over and help you plan it."

WHEN OLDS got back to his range that night, he was so filled with the surprising enthusiasm of Eulalia George that he decided to have another look at his herd. All he found were their tracks, disappearing into the badlands. A dull anger burned through him. Olds trailed in the moonlight far enough to be sure the rustlers had actually been at work. Then he forced himself to be methodical. If he wanted his cattle back, he had to keep his head. Pete Mantel and his *bandidos* had a wide and wicked name.

Olds changed horses at the corral, refilled his saddle canteen from the springs, checked his rifle and sixgun and loaded his saddlebags with jerky and bullets.

By morning, he was involved in a labyrinth of hills, wandering canyons, weird pinnacles and sharp ridges. He broke through a thicket-choked draw into the rocky entrance of a widening canyon. Someone said, "What you want, bucko?"

There was no chance to go for his gun. Sunlight flashed off the barrels of rifles. They rested on rocks on either side of him. Olds forced himself easy in the saddle. A heavy-shouldered, swarthy man with a bushy black beard ambled up.

"You Pete Mantel?" Olds said quickly, striving to keep the shake from his voice. "I want my herd back."

"How you figure getting that herd back, bucko?" Mantel rumbled. "My *bandidos* could have dropped you from your saddle two hours ago."

"You've been watching me for two hours?" Olds said, startled.

"You underestimate Pete Mantel, bucko; that is often fatal."

"Why didn't you drop me? You knew why I was coming here."

Mantel shrugged his big shoulders, black eyes glistening. "I have no wish to kill unless I have to. I'm a very gentle hombre. It is not your life I want, but your steers; I have those."

Olds forced a grin. "Reckon I made a long trip for nothin'," he drawled.

"For nothing, bucko? You met Pete Mantel."

"I'd say the pleasure was all yours." Carefully, Olds turned his mount, steeling himself against a bullet.

Gently, the rustler said, "Bucko, some advice. I suggest you run something on your range that's not worth rustling." The outlaw's laughter trailed Olds clear through the draw.

By the time his pony picked its way out of the badlands, Olds was hot, tired and discouraged. He turned his mount into the corral, lay full-length at the edge of the springs and plunged his head into the cooling water. He heard a horse trotting through the brush. He replaced his hat and dropped a hand to his gun.

It was Eulalia. Her brilliant smile faded to a disturbed expression as he slid off the horse and came to him. "Something's wrong."

"The rustlers cleaned me out last night."

"You won't give up?"

"Not if I can figure out Mantel's suggestion to run something not worth rustling."

A hand touched his arm. "You went after them."

"Yeah. Mantel had the drop on me all the way. It's take the whole Lazy D crew to rid the badlands of those *bandidos*."

"Why don't you ask him?"

"DeLancey?" Olds laughed shortly. "The rustlers don't bother him. It's just the small spreads without the line-riders that are getting hit. Working so long for the Lazy D, I didn't realize that."

"But surely Buck—Mr. DeLancey—would help if the small ranchers got together and appealed to him for aid."

Olds turned from her, staring across the heat-shimmering prairie. In a nearby clearing, Old Grunter crossed, snout to the ground. Olds' mouth dropped open. "Hogs!" he shouted.

Eulalia gasped. "I was only trying to help!" She ran to her horse and left at a gallop before Olds realized what was wrong.

IT WAS obvious she had not forgiven him a week later when Olds rode up to the George homestead at noon. Eulalia was carrying water from the well. She lifted her head high and entered the cabin without taking notice of his arrival. Mrs. George came out and said "Wash up. The men-folk will be here soon."

Olds was having a smoke, hunkered against the corral, when George and his sons drove up in a wagon. Eulalia stepped from the cabin clad in her riding clothes.

Olds told George, "I've contacted all the small ranchers and homesteaders bordering the badlands to meet here tonight."

"A pleasure," George acknowledged. "We heard of your trouble. My sympathy."

Eulalia said, "You invited all the small ranchers. Did you include Mr. DeLancey.

"No, ma'am," Olds said mildly.

Sharply, Eulalia informed her father. "I'm going for a ride." She strode toward the corral.

By sundown, a dozen men, some

from ranches sixty miles distant, gathered in the George cabin. Olds got up to talk. Eulalia walked in with DeLancey.

"I understood there was a meeting here," DeLancey suggested, staring at Olds.

"It didn't seem to concern you," Olds said.

"Everything that happens on Lazy D range concerns me, friend."

George spoke up quietly. "Everyone is welcome; leave your gun on the table and find a seat, DeLancey."

Eulalia's eyes gleamed triumphantly toward Olds. She joined her mother, busy at the big cook stove.

"I started to say," Olds said, "that we've got to organize to fight Mantel."

DeLancy said, "Mantel and his *bandidos* don't bother me."

"That's the reason I didn't bother asking you here. But my herd ain't the only small outfit that's been wiped out by Mantel. Every man here has been hurt bad by the rustlers."

"But what can we do to stop it—without Lazy D help?" asked Tom Claxton of the Slash C, the oldest rancher.

"Luke George's daughter made a likely suggestion," Olds said. "She asked why didn't we organize." Olds glanced toward the stove. Though her back was to him, his words arrested Eulalia at her work. "Organization is the secret to Mantel's operations. He doesn't fool with Lazy D beef, because he might have a fight on his hands; he just hits us isolated little fellows that offer easy pickin's."

"How will organizing help us?" asked Don Norton of the Lined N. "There's not a rancher here with a neighbor closer than twenty miles."

"Mantel gave me another idea," Olds informed them.

DeLancey came to his feet. "You talked to Pete Mantel?"

"When I went into the badlands after my cattle."

"Don't tell me you brought them back?"

Olds grinned. He scratched at his head. "Mantel sent me scurrying out of there with my tail plumb tucked under. But he made a joke; he advised me to run something on my range not worth rustling."

"There's an idea!" ridiculed DeLancey.

George observed quietly, "The rustlers don't bother us homesteaders."

"Because you grow things," DeLancey protested. "You keep no stock worth the trouble of rustling. What are ranchers going to run besides cattle and horses? Scorpions? Rattlesnakes?"

"Nope," Olds said. "Hogs."

Eulalia turned abruptly. Remembrance crossed her face. Olds grinned at her, then around at the startled expressions on the ranchers faces.

DeLancey shook his head. "I'm wasting my time." He clamped on his hat, glanced across at Eulalia and walked out. Eulalia followed. Olds felt funny in the pit of his stomach.

"You mean razorbacks?" asked Oley Mays of the Dot O.

"Ornery, cactus and rattlesnake chewing razorbacks," Olds agreed.

George said, "Last time I was in Prairie Town, hogs was bringing six dollars and fifty cents a head."

"What's your idea?" urged Max Anton of the Tailed A.

"Mantel's idea," Olds corrected. "Hogs certainly ain't worth a second look by any self-respectin' rustler. I figure there must be thousands of the varmints running wild on the prairie and through the badlands. So why don't we organize, pool our resources, and run down every hog in the territory."

"I'm losing money on my cattle—what's left of them," Norton spoke up. "At six-fifty a head, I could make more on hogs for certain."

"To show Mantel and his *bandidos* we mean business," Olds said, "I'd suggest we herd our cattle together and

sell what's left of them in Prairie Town right away."

"And keep Mantel from getting 'em," Claxton approved.

BEFORE the ranchers left the next morning to start the roundup at Anton's Tailed A for the cleanup drive to Prairie Town, Eulalia sought Olds out. "I think your plan is wonderful."

"Don't reckon I deserve much credit," Olds replied, cheerfully.

"Most men would have given up. My apologies for thinking you had."

"I haven't given up. Seems like when I look at you, I just get plumb full of ideas."

Eulalia blushed prettily.

With the range cleared of cattle, except for the far-ranging Lazy D herds, the ranchers and their few hands started brush-popping for the hogs, roping and hauling the squealing, fighting razorbacks to pens constructed by the homesteaders.

Olds, accompanied by George and his sons, worked the Badlands Springs area. The first day, one of the boys tossed a loop over Old Grunter; he was promptly pulled from his uncertain saddle. Olds diverted the boar's attention from the sodbuster.

"This one we leave alone," Olds said. "He's so ornery mean, he don't even make a good hog." He grinned after Old Grunter, as the animal trotted of.

As the hog drive progressed, Olds started penetrating into the badlands. He was confident the activities were closely watched by outlaw eyes. He was proved right one day when Pete Mantel rode up on a nearby ridge with several heavily armed lieutenants.

Olds and George were hazing hogs into a newly constructed pen. Mantel walked his horse down the slope. Olds warned, "This is the rustler boss himself. Continue what you're doing," and sent his pony to meet Mantel.

Close up, the big outlaw made an imposing picture, sitting erect and at ease on his mount. His dark eyes and black beard glistened in the sunlight. He told Olds, "Bucko, you make it tough on my *bandidos*."

"I'm only taking your advice; you told me to run something not worth rustling."

Mantel's white teeth gleamed. "It is my weakness; I talk too much. That is sad. It makes me recall why my father, the bravest *bandido* in the west, wound up on a hangman's tree." He whirled his horse and ran it back up the slope. His *bandidos* followed him from sight. Olds told his pony softly, "It's working out."

After that, Olds and the men working with him often saw the rustlers passing close by, singly or in groups. Within the week, the small ranchers and homesteaders learned that isolated herds of Lazy D cattle had been hit. A day later, Eulalia rode into the badlan 's hog camp Olds had established with Claxton and his Slash C hands.

"DeLancey has called a meeting at home for tonight," the girl said.

Olds regarded her, so solemn on the saddle. "I hear he's being hit hard.

"Buck says it's like fighting phantoms. He gets his men set at one location, and they strike at another. I'm certain he'll ask all of us to join in a fight against them this time."

"I hope so," Olds said ruefully. "It'll purely be a pleasure to get back to hazing longhorns again."

THE RANCHERS and homesteaders had just gathered in the cabin that evening when there was a rush of hooves outside. They all stared apprehensively at the door. George said, "Boys." His three sons nodded, took shotguns from the rifle rack and spread silently across the room, casually concealing the weapons.

It was DeLancey's voice that lashed into the cabin. "Olds—step out here."

Everyone looked at Olds. Eulalia started toward the door from her position besides the stove. George said,

"Wait." He went to the door. "I don't know why you come here with so many armed men, DeLancey. But you called a meeting in my home and we're all here. Come in."

Horses milled outside. DeLancey and three of his riders filled the door. George remained in front of them. "Check your guns at the table like the rest of my guests. "Thank you, gents."

Anger riding high on his cheeks, DeLancey faced the room. His eyes lit hard on Olds. "I want Olds," he said flatly.

"What for?" asked George.

"Rustling."

"Now, that's a pretty serious charge," Olds murmured. "Can you back it up?"

DeLancey snapped, "Take him, boys."

DeLancey's men started for Olds. Eulalia called, "Buck!" George said, "Boys." His three sons rose and trained the shotguns. All movement stopped. "We want to hear the reasons," George said.

Muscles worked in DeLancey's jaws. "There was no rustling on the Lazy D until Olds quit."

Olds drawled, "Pete Mantel had easy pickin's on the small ranches until we got rid of our cattle and went into the hog business. That left the only cattle near the badlands belonging to you."

"There's only one man in these parts outside my crew who knows the Lazy D range like the palm of his hand," DeLancey said; "Olds. The rustlers always strike where we aren't."

"Mantel doesn't hold his *bandidos* by getting them killed off," Olds said.

"You seem to know all about Mantel," DeLancey said hotly.

"I been studying him and his habits," Olds admitted.

CLAXTON spoke up. "Don't hardly see how Olds can have anything to do with the rustling. He's been wrangling hogs in the badlands with the rest of us."

"You sleep with him?" DeLancey asked.

"Near him."

"What's to prevent him from leaving his bedroll at night?"

Claxton glanced across at Olds and away. "Nothin', I reckon."

"George," DeLancey continued triumphantly, "Eulalia told me you were with Olds when he talked to Mantel one day."

George looked troubled. "That's right."

"What did they say?"

"I don't know; I wasn't close enough to hear."

A heavy silence fell over the room.

"Tell you what I'll do," Olds said. "I'll bring Mantel here. Seems the only way I can clear myself."

Claxton studied him. "You didn't have much luck with him when you went after your stolen beef."

"It's a scheme to get away!" DeLancey charged.

Olds told George, "My word I'll bring Mantel back."

"Eulalia," George ordered the white-faced girl, "tell DeLancey's men he wants them to go back to the ranch; he doesn't need them."

"I don't—" DeLancey began.

"Boys," George said.

DeLancey stood silent, his features hard in the lamplight. Eulalia's voice could be heard outside, then the sound of hooves scudding across the prairie and fading.

Olds rose, retrieved his gun, grinned around the room and strolled through the door. He passed Eulalia coming back in. She touched his arm. Olds murmured, "DeLancey's all right; he just made a mistake."

Saddling up, Olds ran his horse freely through the night until he entered the badlands. There he allowed the animal to pick its way up the dark ridges and black draws at a steady walk, sometimes dozing in the saddle.

Just before daybreak, he left the pony at the foot of a weird piled-rock formation.

Shadows from the badlands jumble of hills, gullies and pinnacles were starting their dawn retreat when Olds scrambled up on a brush covered ridge overlooking the outlaw camp. Breathing hard, Olds hunched down and got out his makings. As he was taking a first deep drag on the smoke, someone emerged from the crude cabin by the bank of the thicket-choked stream and stretched hugely.

Olds ground his smoke beneath a boot heel. He returned to his horse, riding openly up a draw. Half an hour later, he saw another mount top a nearby ridge. Immediately, Olds started his pony through hazing actions, as if driving something through the brush.

Pete Mantel came into clear view. Olds yelled, "Did you see where that hog went?"

The outlaw chief was laughing when Olds galloped up beside him. Olds pulled his gun and slashed its barrel solidly against Mantel's head. Mantel crumpled. Olds released a big gust of air from his lungs. Wryly, he wondered how a man could get so scared of a carefully considered action.

WHEN OLDS reahed the George cabin, the ranchers and homesteaders crowded around. He led Mantel's horse with the outlaw bound belly-down across the saddle.

"By jingo!" Old Man Claxton shouted. "He done it!"

DeLancey walked up, had his look at Mantel, and turned away. Eulalia watched beside her mother near the cabin. Roughly, the younger hands pulled Mantel from the horse. He laughed up at Olds as they untied all but his hands. "It is my mistake, bucko. I thought you were only brave, like my father, and not so smart when you came alone for your cattle." They boosted him astride his horse and led it behind the barn.

The older men gathered around Olds. DeLancey stood apart. Apologetically, Claxton said, "I know you didn't stay in your bedroll every night. There were times when you came into camp while the rest of us were getting up." The old man glanced toward DeLancey. "But I wasn't going to hang a good man for that."

Olds drawled, "I was studying Mantel's habits. He got so used to us hunting razorbacks in the badlands, he got careless. I figured Mantel considered himself a cut above the average *bandido*. That made him a lonely man who rode alone in the early morning. It was a case of one gent getting close enough to buffalo him. Shots would have brought the whole gang to his rescue."

There was a sudden slap of hand against horseflesh, heard clear in the prairie air. Hooves sounded. Mantel's riderless horse shot out from behind the barn. Grim faced riders brought it back.

"With Mantel hung, they's nothing to do but clean out the badlands!" Claxton shouted.

"And go back to wrangling longhorns like God intended, 'stead of them stinkin' hawgs!" a voice echoed back.

DeLancey's head lifted. He stepped commandingly forward. His words rang out, quieting the released hubbub. "The Lazy D will ride."

Quietly Claxton said, "Olds will lead us." The men all regarded DeLancey. His eyes roved over them. The waiting silence ran on. With a curt glance at Olds, DeLancey turned to his waiting horse.

Olds delegated a pair of men to bury Mantel's body, then the preparatory excitement began. Olds got a fresh mount from the corral. He looked across the crowded yard, filled with men checking guns and ammunition and horses. Eulalia, standing quietly by the cabin, met his eyes. Olds made his way across the yard, leading his pony.

"Eulalia," he said, "when I come back—"

"Olds!" came the cry. "We're ready."

Olds swung up. He grinned down at her. Eulalia raised a hand, attempting a smile. The rush of horses and men caught Olds. He lifted his hat and took his place at the head of the column. They thundered out of the yard.

LATE THE next afternoon, Olds returned to the homestead with George and his sons. Mrs. George was standing outside, a shotgun in her arms. There were tears in her eyes. "You've all come back."

George said, "It's all over, mother."

Olds asked, "Where's Eulalia?"

"That girl!" Mrs. George fussed. "She said she would wait at the ranch house."

Olds settled wearily in his saddle. There was only one ranch house in these parts. The Lazy D.

"Light and rest," George urged.

Olds shook his head. "My thanks. I'll head for home."

He rode the distance without thought. The lethargy was on him, the utter, lost weariness, until he neared the springs. Then he heard a sudden cry. Eulalia came running out of the brush. Behind her, short legs churning, appeared Old Grunter.

A burst of glory exploded inside Olds. A dig of spurs sent his pony into a run. Olds swept the girl off the ground, into his arms, leaving the huge razorback snorting and stamping out its anger. Eulalia was a softness against Olds.

"Your ma said you'd gone to the ranch house," Olds murmured. "I thought she meant the Lazy D."

"There's never been but one ranch house for me. I'd just found the right spot for building it when—" She shuddered gently. "That awful beast."

"Don't talk like that," Olds advised, happily. "You and that hog got a lot in common."

"What a thing to say!" Eulalia whispered, snuggling warmly against him.

Olds' reactions were scarcely what they would have been toward Old Grunter.

★

Can man's dream of peace ever come true? Will the time arrive when there are

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SCIENCE FICTION STORIES

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XIT

Special Feature by HAROLD GLUCK

THEY SAY there is a mint of money to be made in inventing and selling new games to the public. Well, here is an idea for a Western game—and free of charge at that. Call it "Rustling."

You would have a series of cards, and on each card there would be a brand. The idea is to change a given brand into another brand. If you get away with it, then you get a ranch as the first prize. If you lose, then you get a rope around your neck as the booby prize. It should be an exciting kid game, especially if you can work in sixshooters, a western chase, and a couple of sheriffs and U. S. Marshals.

Probably one of the toughest brands to change was the famous XIT. Seems Texas needed a new capital and money was a bit short down in that Lone Star State. And so a deal was arranged whereby the new capital was to be built and in exchange 3,000,000 acres of land were given to the financiers. And that's how the greatest barbed wire fencing project in the West started. And with it the birth of the XIT Ranch.

Al Blocker, the veteran trail driver, designed the brand. He said he picked XIT because it "looked good, sounded good, and was easy to put on." And you can add to that the additional fact that a good brand must be difficult to alter. A legend grew up that XIT meant ten counties in Texas and that the brand was so chosen because the cowboys rode over that many counties without leaving the home range. X-ten; I-In; T-Texas.

Now that idea for the game "Rustling" isn't exactly original, because around their fires at night, the cowboys of the XIT Ranch would sit and tell all kinds of stories. And then some of them would draw the XIT brand in the sand. They would have a game in which the object was to change the XIT into a Texas Star. In the center of the Texas Star was a cross. Go ahead and try it yourself. It can be done.

Of course rustlers eyed the vast amount of beef on the XIT Ranch, and tried to figure out how to change the brand. One changed it into a Boxed XITF. And also into a Boxed XITE. And an expert created a 4 Box P from XIT.

In burning a brand, the rustler traces his iron over the entire new brand. The purpose is to give it the same freshly branded appearance all over. But nature was on the side of law and order, for brands usually "hair over" and the hair ruffles to show the brand distinctly. However a brand applied after the animal became old may fail to "hair over"; instead there would be left a whitish calloused scar. At close inspection, you saw the altered brand as though it were original. From a distance you could see the old brand. Tough for the "legitimate owner" to explain that one.

If the quarrel got tough, there was another way to check on the animal: shoot the steer, skin it, then take a look at the inside of the skin. For as the hide begins to dry, the original brand stands out more distinctly against the light than the altered part.

Get busy working on the details of that game "Rustling." Maybe you should include a branding iron.

★

"Sure, you can get Big Bill Lars if you go after him. But Lars' reputation will kill you, because there are plenty of gunslicks eager to finish off the man who gets Lars, and thus build up their own reputation."

REPUTATION

by RAY G. ELLIS

THE *GAY LADY* saloon was empty when Ad Brophy shoved through the batwings and walked to the bar. He put the quarter dollar on the polished bar gently and sourly regarded Luke, the bartender. Brophy's eyes were bloodshot and his hands shook slightly.

"Little hair of the dog that bit you?" Luke asked.

"Yeah, yeah, and hurry up," Ad Brophy said; "I think I'm dyin'."

The bartender stooped to the cupboards from which he had not yet removed his stock of liquor for the day. "You really tied one on last night," he said over his shoulder. "You should have taken it easy your first night home."

"Quit your damn gab and get the stuff out here." Brophy's head throbbed intently as he said the words.

Luke set the bottle and a glass before him and Ad poured a stiff drink and downed it. He stood silently, glaring into the bar mirror and waiting for the liquor to take its effect. When it didn't, he poured another drink and drank that. Then he felt better.

"You sure picked a couple of nice characters to pal around with," Luke said finally. "After they won most of your money at poker, you stood for the drinks all around until you were all drunk."

Brophy began to think then, trying to remember just what had happened. At first there was nothing; then he began to remember something of the evening before. He remembered two faces and then two names, Rod Bartel and Dal Johns, and they were at one of the two back tables playing poker.

Brophy shook his head. "I think you're right, Luke," he said. "I should have taken it a little slower on my first night home. Two years without the stuff can make a man soft to it."

Luke shrugged. "I guess after that long in prison a man's entitled to a little fun."

Brophy shoved away from the bar and made for the door, his stomach gnawing hungrily now.

"I hope you didn't mean what you said last night," Luke called after him.

Brophy stopped just inside the batwings and turned. "What's that?" he said.

"About how you was gunnin' for Big Bill Lars."

The muscles around Brophy's mouth tightened. "I meant every word of it," he said flatly. "You can tell him that, too."

"I doubt if he'll be in," Luke said,

as Brophy shoved through the batwings.

AD WENT across the street to the hotel dining room and saw with relief that his two friends of the night before were not yet up and about. He wolfed down his breakfast and went back out onto the street. It was not yet noon and the little town was still quiet.

He walked down the street, looking into the shop windows and liking the feeling of familiarity that came over him. For a moment the bitterness slipped from him and he felt at peace with the town. He passed a millinery shop, barely glancing in the window, but he looked again before he passed—for he saw a familiar face inside.

Ad hesitated for a moment, then started to move on but the girl had come around the counter and was opening the door. He stopped.

"Why Ad Brophy, aren't you coming in to see me?" the girl said.

Ad colored at the girl's hurt tone, but he couldn't help staring at her, nevertheless. Netty Adams was blonde and blue-eyed, and those eyes were bright and wide as she looked at him. He remembered the warm softness of her lips, the tender words that had passed between them. Then he shoved the memories from him. That was two years ago and before prison. Finally he thought to remove his hat. "I...I was just passing by," he said. "It's nice to see you again, Netty."

"Well, come on in; you don't have to run from me. I'm perfectly harmless."

He moved toward the girl, knowing already that he hadn't forgotten her as he had talked himself into believing. His pulse throbbed faster and he knew that she wasn't harmless, not to him, anyway.

The store was small but Netty had it neatly arranged and at the back there was a small room with several chairs, a table and a pot of hot coffee. She led Ad into this room and they sat at the table.

Her nearness was exciting to him and he wished he was somewhere else. She poured them each coffee and sat down at the table. "I didn't expect you in from the ranch this early, Ad."

"I didn't go home last night."

"But your father was waiting for you, Ad. After all, you haven't seen him for two years. The least you could do was go see him your first day home."

Brophy saw the disappointment on her face and for the first time he felt a slight sense of shame; it made him angry that she should do this to him.

"He never had time for me for twenty-two years; it won't hurt him to have a taste of it for a few days."

Disappointment was plain on Netty's face. "He's changed these past two years, Ad," she said. "Maybe he was wrong all that time, but he was building the ranch for you. He wants to see you now. Why don't you go to him?"

Ad stood up and shoved his hat on his head. "Why don't you lay off that stuff? What I do is my own business."

Netty looked up at him and there was sadness in her eyes. She shook her head. "You haven't changed at all, have you?" she said. "I was hoping that things would be different with you when you came back."

AD WALKED stiffly back to the street. For a moment he saw himself and recognized the two things within him that he had never seen before. Part of him wanted nothing more than to stay at peace with the world; but another part was always at war, and it was so powerful that it ruled his emotion most of the time. He wondered why he wanted to reach out to the world as if to take it in his hands and bend and twist it into some grotesque shape until it cried out to him to stop. He stood unmoving on the boardwalk, staring down the street and the thought stirred something akin to fear in him. Then someone moved into his line of sight and he shoved the thought from him, glad to be rid of it.

He focused his gaze on the two men and moved toward them. Rod Bartel looked up the street and threw his hand up in salute. Dal Johns jerked his head upward as Ad drew up beside them. The two men hadn't yet shaved, and their eyes were as bloodshot as Ad's had been earlier.

"You're up early," Rod grunted.

Ad looked at the big man and felt almost as if he were looking at a stranger; yet he knew that but a few short hours before he would have stood back to back with this man and fought the whole town if need be.

"I couldn't sleep," he said; "used to getting up early, I guess."

"Yeah, I hear they don't believe in sleep up there."

"Come on, Rod, let's quit the gabbin' and get a drink before I pass out right here in the street," Dal Johns said.

Ad followed the two into the saloon. Luke looked at Brophy for a moment but his eyes were flat. Ad returned the gaze. *What the hell,* he thought. It was his business who he kept company with. All this concern about him angered him. No one had been sorry to see him go when they'd packed him off two years ago.

Ad took the bottle from Rod and poured himself a drink. He lifted it to his mouth but the odor turned his stomach and he set it back down. He looked up to see Dal Johns watching him. Johns smiled thinly and tossed his own drink down.

"I figgered it was just talk," Johns said; "if you can't take whiskey for breakfast, you can't take a marshal for lunch."

Anger shot through Ad and he threw the whiskey past Rod at Johns' face. It fell short and spilled down the man's vest. Dal Johns' hand was a blur as he dug for his gun, but Rod's hand was faster and he caught his partner's hand before he had the gun out of holster.

"He don't have a gun," Rod said. "You goin' to shoot an unarmed man? That's murder and you wouldn't stand a chance—not when you murder a man in his own bailiwick."

Ad watched as the tension slowly left Dal Johns. The moment was past, and Johns would do nothing now, Ad knew. He marveled at his own stupidity for he knew just how close he had come to death. The act of throwing the whiskey had been an impulse that he couldn't check, and he knew it was another act of the war within himself.

ROD TURNED to Ad and there was disgust on his face. "I don't know as I want to side a man that'd pull a stunt as stupid as that. Johns could cut you down in a second even if you was wearin' your guns."

"I don't give a damn what you do," Ad said. "Who asked you to side with me, anyway?"

"You did, last night." Rod looked at the big clock on the wall above the bar. "In about two hours we're going to gun down the marshal."

Ad stared into the mirror. He remembered nothing about their plans, and he wondered whether to show his ignorance or not. Ad had planned to get the marshal for what the lawman had done to him—but not just yet. He'd wanted a few days in town to get the feel of the place again.

"I have to go out to the ranch before then," Ad said.

Johns snorted. "What'd I tell you, Rod. Full of big talk when he's drunk, but a yellow streak a mile wide when he's sober. We might as well get out of here now. We'll never get us a marshal here. Big Bill wouldn't fool with this kid; that'd be like shootin' a barnyard chicken to him."

Ad's face burned at the insults and he moved away from the bar. Johns turned his head to watch Ad but he didn't move from the bar.

"Run get your hogleg, sonny boy," Johns said, "then come talk to me."

"I'll be back in time," Ad said. "You'll get your marshal for lunch. But

I'd like to know just one thing. What've you got against Lars?"

"He's a lawman, ain't he?" Rod said, and that answered the question fully.

"Hell, he's just honorary marshal now," Luke put in. "Don't need no marshal in this town now—not since the trail herds quit comin' here. You boys aimin' to build a reputation on Big Bill Lars' name ought to think twice about it. He's still a dangerous man."

"Your nose is too big," Johns said, turning to Luke. "You ought to get it fixed."

Luke retreated to the other end of the bar. Ad remained standing by the two men for a moment, then turned toward the batwings.

"I'll be back in a couple of hours," he said over his shoulder.

BROPHY rode south out of town. The heat of the summer had passed and the leaves were just beginning to turn. In another week or so they would be at their brightest. After several miles, he left the stage road and cut up over a hill to the west. Far below and nestled among trees he saw the Circle-B ranch house.

The trees were yellow and the slight breeze blew an occasional leaf from the tree and it was like a floating gold coin as it flickered to the ground. Ad felt the tension ease from him as he rode toward the house and it was different than when he had lived here before. Then there had been tension all the time that he was here and that was what had caused the trouble in the first place.

He remembered now how he had always wanted to work around the ranch, ride fences, break horses, anything that the rest of the hands did. He remembered too, how ashamed he had been that he couldn't do any of these things, for his father hadn't wanted him to mingle with the common men that he employed.

He should have run away, Brophy knew now, but he had been too weak to do that and so he had gone into town nearly every night to drink in the bar and mingle with men and feel that he was one of them. His father hadn't liked that, either, but he didn't know how to stop it, so he had tried to overlook it.

Then there was that one night when they had dared him to shoot up the town and he, being drunk enough to have the nerve, had done just that. Of course, Bill Lars hadn't liked that; Lars had tried to disarm him and in the scuffle the gun had gone off once more, and Lars had fallen to the ground.

After that, it was a nightmare of jostling crowds and shouting men. Some had stood away from him with a look of fear and respect in their eyes, for wasn't he the one that had shot Big Bill Lars, a feat that hadn't been performed by anyone before, although many had tried? Others, though, had held him in contempt and these men had thrown him in jail.

He had been confident that he would be acquitted, for it had been a long time since anyone had been adjudged guilty of anything worse than disorderliness in that wild town. Then, too, his father was a powerful man because of his money. But he had been found guilty and sentenced to two years in the penitentary; and Ad had known that it was because Big Bill Lars had wanted it that way. He could have expected that—except that Lars had told him to his face, when Ad had visited him at his house, that he didn't hold him to blame, and that he hoped that it wouldn't make any difference between Ad and Netty, whom he had raised almost like his own daughter. He'd thought then that he would get off with a suspended sentence but when the sentence came, Ad knew Lars had lied to him. For two years he had been waiting to kill the man.

Brophy rode into the shade of the

[*Turn To Page* 82]

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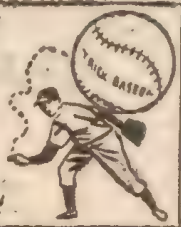

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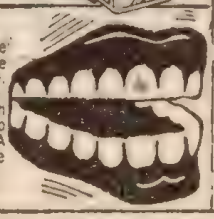

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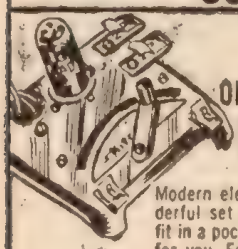

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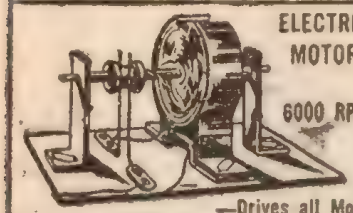

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trees and around to the front of the house. He dismounted and tied his horse at the rail. The house was the same as he remembered it and he guessed that it always would be. A little of the tension inside him returned as he entered the big living room. The beam-ceilinged room was empty and Ad went to the hall and down it to his father's office.

He knocked, something he had never done before, then entered when he heard the bass voice of his father bidding him to come in.

FRANK BROPHY was squinting over some books when Ad entered. Then he turned when his visitor made no sound. Ad watched the old man's face light up in a smile, and he was struck by the new lines and gray hairs that his father had acquired since he had been away. The rancher rose from his chair and came toward Ad.

"Welcome home, son," he said and extended a work-hardened hand.

Ad took it and felt the strength of it. "I couldn't make it out last night," he said.

"Some of the boys said you was havin' yourself quite a time of it."

"Why shouldn't I? Two years is a long time to be cooped up like an animal," Ad said.

"If it hadn't been for Big Bill, you'd have been away for a lot longer than that."

Ad looked at his father and guessed that someone had told him of his plan to shoot the marshal. "If it hadn't been for you, you mean," he said. "Lars told me he was doing everything for me he could, and then he turned right around and fixed me up with a two year sentence."

Frank went back to his chair and sat down. "Sit down, Ad," he said; "I've got a little story to tell you about that."

"Nothing you say can change the way I feel," Ad said stubbornly. "He didn't want Netty and I to get married,

[*Turn To Page* 84]

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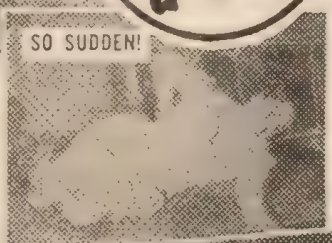

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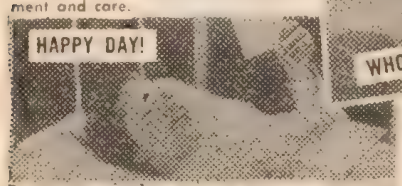

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and he fixed that when he sent me up."

"It wasn't my money that got you off as light as you did; I didn't turn a hand to help you. I figured you got what you deserved, and I wasn't about to do any more for you. I worked hard all my life to build up this ranch for you and you did nothing to repay me. Sure, I was all wrong; I know that now, but I didn't then. I should have let you make your own way all along and I figured that two years ago was a good time to start."

Ad looked into his father's gray eyes blankly. "You mean you didn't get me off?" he said.

"I did nothing. Big Bill went to bat for you behind the lines, and almost got you off without any sentence at all; if he had been able to come to court, you probably wouldn't have gone to prison."

"I don't believe it," Ad said, coming to his feet. "You're just telling me this, hoping that I won't kill him. But I'm going to kill Bill Lars, do you understand? I'm going to kill him."

Frank Brophy's eyes held a deep sadness. "You may kill him, Ad, but you're not a killer. You're trying to be something that you aren't; if you do this, it will kill *you*."

The old man leaned forward in his chair and looked up at his son. "Stay out here for a few days, Ad," he said; "you'll forget the past as soon as you get to working."

"I'll never work this ranch," Ad said angrily. "When I wanted to work, it was no go. Well, now I'm through; I'm through with you and this town."

Ad strode from the room, feeling his fathers gaze on his back, and he held it stiff. His boots were loud as he left the living room for the front porch. A few minutes later he was kicking his mount up the hill behind the house.

He remembered the words that Dal Johns had spoken just before he had left the saloon. A yellow streak a mile wide, he'd said. He'd eat those words

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before this day was over and maybe he'd eat a little lead too, if he got to talking smart again.

He hit the road for town and let his mount stretch out to a hard run. *It'll kill you,* his father had said. *It'll kill Bill Lars,* Ad thought. He'd ride out after it was over. Head north maybe to the Black Hills. There'd be plenty of places to hide there.

Then he was in the town and he pulled up in front of the saloon and was inside before his dust caught up with his mount and engulfed it in a choking cloud.

THE SALOON was nearly empty. Luke looked up from his endless task of polishing glasses and this time there was expression on his usually blank face. It was surprise. Ad strode to the bar.

"Didn't think you'd be back today," Luke said.

"There's some others that thought the same way," Ad said. "Where's Rod and Dal? They clear out?"

"They're still here, Ad," Luke said. "I wish to hell they had cleared out. Maybe you'd have got some sense in your head."

Ad turned toward the heavy man. "You tellin' me what to do, too?" he said.

" 'Pears to me that you need someone to tell you. Ain't you done enough to Bill without tryin' to kill him, too? What good will it do?"

"Ain't *I* done enough to him? Look what he done to me. Two years in prison for shootin' up the town. If he hadn't tried to disarm me, nothin' would have happened. Hell, someone shot up this burg every night in the week."

"Yeah, but you just happened to be unlucky enough to shoot Lars."

The batwings swung open and Rod and Dal Johns strode in. "He just happened to be unlucky enough to get shot by me," Ad said over his shoulder.

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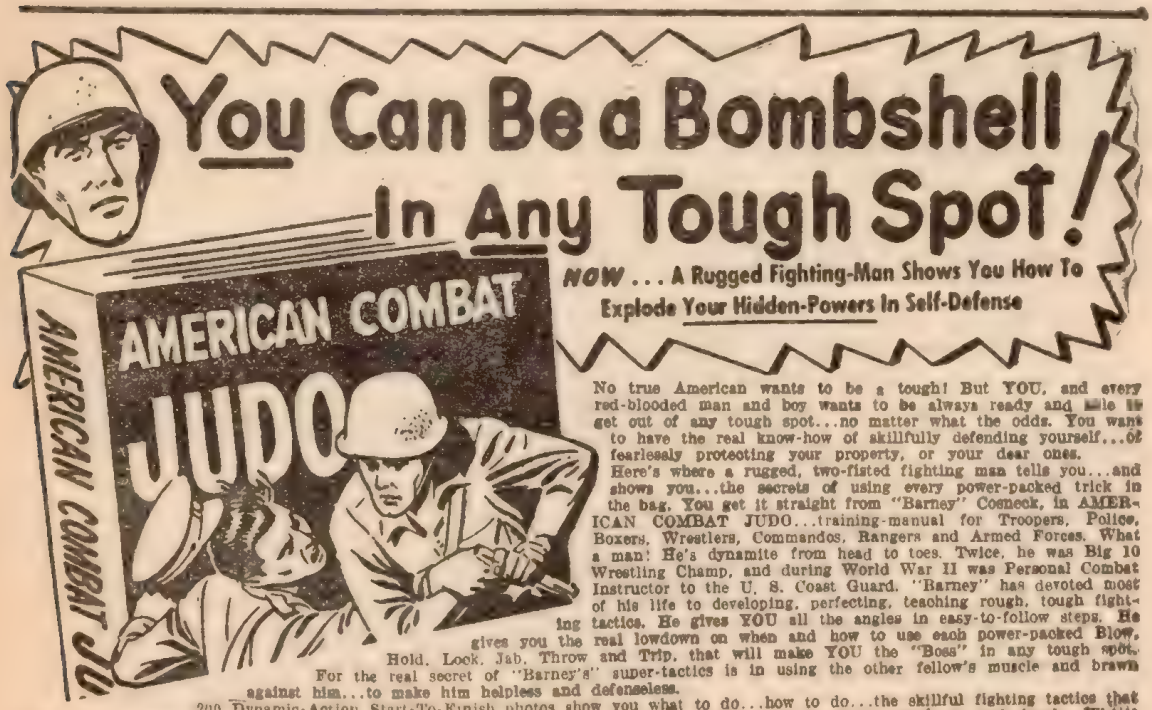
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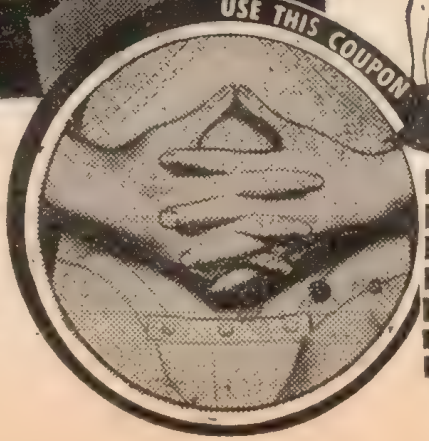

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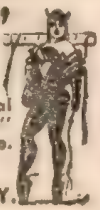

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DOUBLE ACTION WESTERN

The two gunmen came to the bar. They were still unshaven and the stale odor of whiskey hit Ad as they stood beside him.

"Well, well, junior got back and with his hogleg, too," Johns said.

"Maybe you'd like to see what kind of spitballs junior's gun shoots," Ad said.

"All right, you two," Rod said. "We didn't come here to shoot each other; we came after Lars. If you want to shoot each other, wait until the business is taken care of."

They turned to the bar then and filled glasses left there by Luke. Ad stared into the long mirror and felt the tension inside him that had mounted until it twisted his insides into knots. He downed his whiskey and for a moment thought he would be sick, but he fought off the feeling and poured another drink. He saw Dal Johns watching him and he gazed back at the man's reflection without expression. Johns was waiting, almost hoping that he would break. He'd not break, Ad told himself.

"We saw Lars," Rod said. "While you was gone we hunted him up and told him you would be waiting for him. He called you a fool."

Ad jerked around and faced Rod. "He'll eat those words," he said.

Dal Johns shoved a silver dollar down the bar toward an old man standing there. "Go tell Lars that Brophy is waiting for him."

Ad watched the old man shuffle through the batwings and the knots in his stomach twisted a little tighter. *It'll kill you,* the words came back to him and he swore aloud. He'd never listened to his father before; why should he listen now? But the words seemed to hang on the edge of his mind.

THEN THE batwings swung open and Ad whirled. But his hand

[*Turn To Page* 90]

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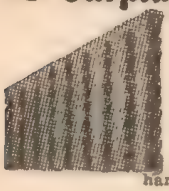

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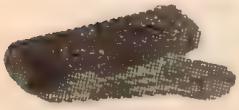

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1—Stubby ¼ x 1½" 1—Recess (#2) ¼ x 4"

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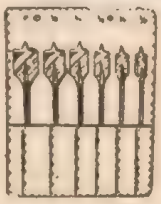

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dropped from the butt of his gun when he recognized Netty. She came to him and Ad was suddenly conscious of the sweat on his forehead. She looked small, clean and pure in the gloom of the bar, and he would have backed away from her if the bar had not been behind him.

"Get out, Ad," Netty said and her voice was sharp, steady. "Get out of town. You don't know what you're doing. You won't have solved anything by killing Lars. He'll kill you even if your bullet reaches him first; his reputation will kill you."

Ad looked into the blue eyes and saw the pleading there and for a moment he longed to crush her to him, to feel the warm softness of her, to forget everything in the past. Then he heard Dal Johns' harsh laugh and the moment was past. Netty was of the past, something that might have been but was gone now, never to return. He stared down at her, unable to speak and saw hope fade from her eyes.

He watched as she walked from him, then she was gone through the batwings and still he watched until they hung still. If he had been alone at that moment he would have ridden from town and run until he could run no farther. But Rod Bartel and Dal Johns were there on each side of him and he could not leave.

Bartel moved away from the bar. "Come on, Dal; we'll go see there's nothing dirty going on."

The two moved from the saloon to take their positions somewhere on the street, ready to shoot anyone that interfered. He wished he knew their exact location. A minute later he shoved heavily from the bar and went to the boardwalk in front of the saloon. He leaned against a post, trying to hide the tumult inside him.

Minutes dragged by and nothing moved in the street. He straightened suddenly and looked up the street be-

[*Turn To Page 92*]

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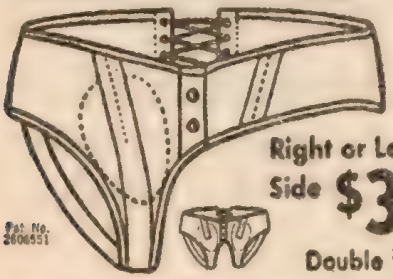

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hind him. It was empty and he felt foolish. Big Bill would not approach from behind.

Then he saw an arm come up in a signal from a doorway down the street and he recognized the color of Bartel's shirt. He glanced across the street and saw the outline of Dal Johns on the other side. Lars would be coming now. He moved toward the center of the street then wiped the sweat from the palm of his right hand. The forty-five felt like a lead weight against his thigh.

Then Lars came around the building on the far corner and Ad Brophy wanted to run but his legs would not function. The sight of Lars unnerved him and he shook violently. He opened his mouth to cry out but nothing came. Big Bill Lars was in a wheelchair pushed by Netty Adams!

Dumbly he watched as Lars waved Netty away and continued up the street toward him, shoving himself along by working the wheels of the chair with his hands. There was a gun in Lars' belt and he wanted to cry. Then everything was clear to him and he hated himself with a hate deeper than he had ever felt for the big marshal.

He saw himself as others had seen him the past two days. They thought, of course, that he knew of Lars' condition because it was his bullet that had done it. That bullet, fired in a drunken stupor, had killed the legs of the big man and still he had tried to get Ad off without a jail sentence. He understood, too, why everyone had begged him to leave the marshal alone and he had thought it was for his own sake.

Honorary marshal. They'd laughed at that and now he wanted to cry at it. Suddenly he remembered that Bartel had told him in the saloon—that they had seen Lars and some of the hate that he felt for himself was di-

[*Turn To Page 94*]

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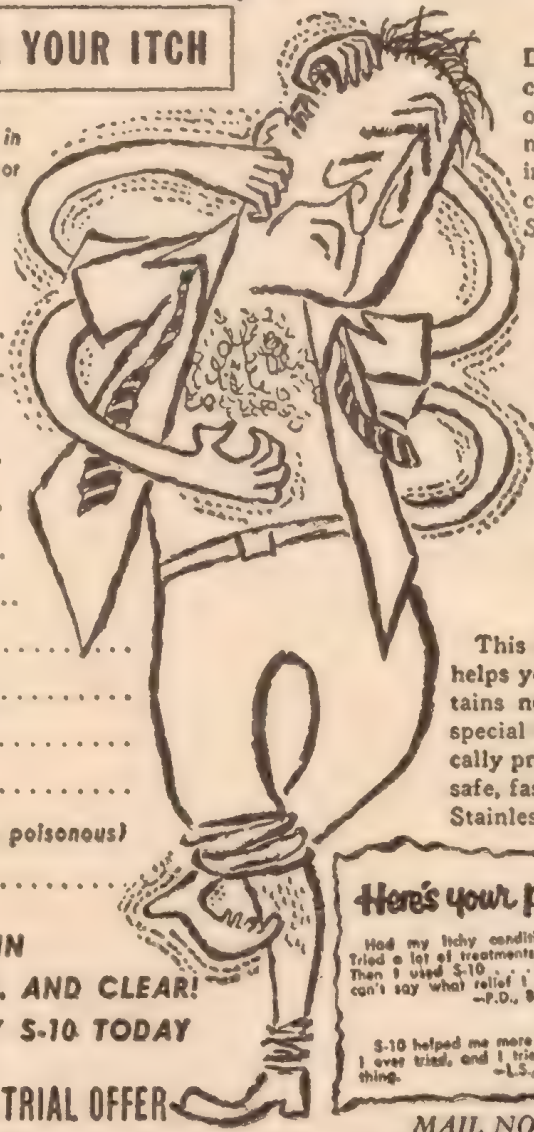

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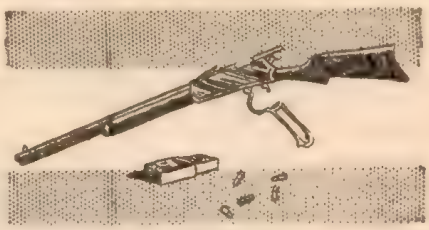
rected toward the two gunmen. They were out to make a reputation. Let him, Ad Brophy, kill Big Bill Lars, then one of them would kill Ad. Then his reputation would be assured until some faster gun got him. That's what his father and Netty had meant when they said that it would kill him if he killed Lars.



LARS WAS closer now, still moving forward with two big hands griping the tires of the wheelchair. He passed the doorways that held Bartel and Johns. Ad could see now the steady gray eyes hard on him and he knew that it was too late to back out now. Any move he made would bring Lars' big gun roaring upward. Still, he thought he would welcome the pain of the bullet; maybe somehow that would atone for what he had done. Then he knew that Johns and Bartel were waitto finish the job if he should fail, and a feeling of helplessness came over him.

Bill Lars knew what was waiting for him in those two doorways that he had just passed but he kept on toward Ad, his eyes never moving from his face. Ad thought of calling to the big man but then knew that any warning would be too late. Bartel and Johns would not stand for any failure. They would kill both himself and the marshal.

That he would die he knew now—but strangely the thought didn't bother him. You suddenly see what you have done to other people's lives and you don't care if you die or not, he thought.

[*Turn To Page 96*]

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He went for his gun then and dove to his right at the same time, not to save himself, but just hoping to save Lars from the death that lurked behind him. Before he cleared leather, he stared into the barrel of Lars' gun and knew why the big man had the reputation he did. Ad threw a shot down the street toward the doorway that concealed Dal Johns before Lars' first shot hit him. The lead hit him near the left shoulder and the impact knocked him from his feet. He saw the look of surprise on Lars' face and he knew that Lars had not expected him to move to his right; he had shot to disable and Ad had jumped into the shot.

He rolled over onto his stomach in time to get one of Johns' bullets in his thigh and he threw another shot at the now-exposed gunman. It was confusion of smoke and gunfire. He saw Lars whirl the wheel chair around and fire at Bartel; then Johns lifted his gun toward the marshal and Ad threw off another shot and saw the big gunman fall. Then, just before everything went black, he saw Lars pitch forward from the wheelchair and he cried out.

He'd thought he was dying, and when he came to, he wondered why he wasn't still in the dirt of the street. The sheets smelled of sunshine and fresh air and he lay still with his eyes closed still not certain that he hadn't died.

Then he opened his eyes and looked around him. The lace curtain rustled at the window and sunlight slanted across the room. It was afternoon, he

[*Turn To Page 98*]

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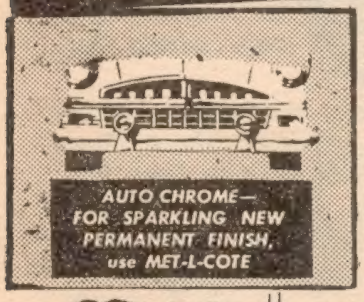

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could tell that from the slant of the sun, so he guessed that he had been unconcious almost a day. He stared at the white ceiling and a memory came back, a memory of Big Bill Lars pitching from a wheelchair. Then he cursed his luck for it having let him live.

The door opened and Netty came in. Ad gazed at her and she was beautiful. He closed his eyes and hoped that she would go away, but she had seen him and she came to the bedside.

"Don't try to hide," she said softly; "I saw you looking at me."

He opened his eyes again and saw the smile on her lips. "Why couldn't you have let me die?" he said.

"What for? I always wanted to be a nurse and you were fine to practice on."

He wondered at the gaity in her voice. How could she help but hate him after what had happened? He turned his gaze from her. "You saved my life for nothing," he said bitterly. "They'll send me to prison for the rest of my life now."

She rose from where she had been kneeling beside his bed and went out of the room. He tried to rise from his bed but he was too weak. Helpless, he thought. But what difference did it make?

The door opened again and Netty came back into the room but this time she didn't close the door behind her. Her face seemed to radiate happiness and again Ad wondered at this. Then he saw the reason and he wanted to shout.

Bill Lars came through the doorway on crutches and he smiled down at Ad. "I got you to thank for this," he said. "If I hadn't been shot out there, I'd have been in that damn wheelchair for the rest of my life. Bartel's last shot before he died hit a nerve or something, the doc said. Anyway when I came to I could move my legs."

"How did you get up so soon?" Ad said. "I knew you were strong but not that strong."

"Soon? It's been almost two weeks man. I may be walking without these crutches before long. You've been laying there twelve days while Netty's been waiting on you hand and foot."

Netty looked up at the marshal and colored. "Bill, you be quiet; you'll embarrass me."

"I forgot to say," Lars went on. "She loved every minute of it. I wouldn't be surprised if she didn't want to do that for the rest of her life."

Ad turned to Netty and looked deeply into the blue eyes. "I've got to get well first," he said. "Then I'll go back to the ranch and prove to dad and myself that I'm man enough to run it. Will you wait for me?"

"I'd wait until the end of time if I had to," she said.

Ad drew her to him and looked up at Lars. The big man winked at him and moved toward the door. "I don't think she'll have to wait long," he said.

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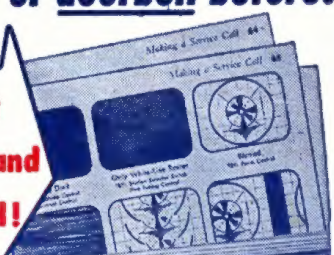

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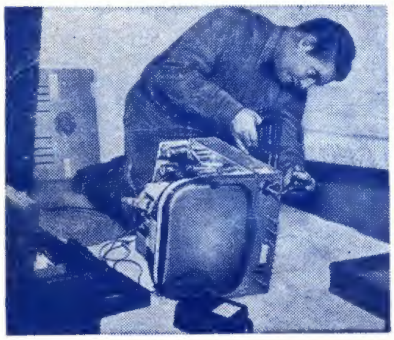

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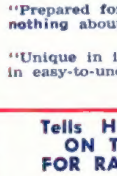

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